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Adjusting to Divorce: A Case Study of Older Hispanic Adults in Miami-Dade

by
Josefina E. Oramas

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University
2013

Approval Page

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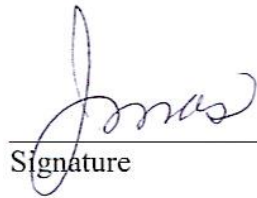
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Acknowledgments

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the faith I have in God. I thank you Lord for granting me the serenity, ability, and opportunity to complete this project.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by the 12 participants who candidly shared their time, experiences and insights without immediate benefit to them. I hope this work gives justice to their voices.

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Nunu, Nana, this is my legacy to you both. With love, mom.

Abstract

Adjusting to Divorce: A Case Study of Older Hispanic Adults in Miami-Dade. Josefina E. Oramas, 2013: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler School of Education. ERIC Descriptors: Social Problems, Family Problems, Divorce, Marital Instability, Family Life

The number of older Hispanic adults who experience divorce in late-life is growing. Nonetheless, both minority groups – Hispanics and older adults – are generally misrepresented and disadvantaged while their families disintegrate through divorce. The literature has failed to represent this population by publishing general research methodologies that cannot successfully and accurately describe their reality. Mental health professionals are exposed to contradicting and confusing views regarding their experience of divorce.

This dissertation presents a qualitative case study based on the perspectives of 12 older Hispanic adults in Miami-Dade who experienced divorce in late-life. An analysis of the data revealed that older Hispanic adults perceive their divorce as a challenge and the best alternative to a dysfunctional relationship. They identify divorce as the only way to reach peace and happiness. Participation in a religious support group brings balance, healing, emotional insight, and gradual adjustment.

The knowledge gained from this study contributes to existing literature regarding divorce adjustment, family therapy, multiculturalism, and qualitative studies. It allows researchers and readers to advocate for social change by involving older Hispanic adults who have been largely ignored so far. It also empowers this population group by allowing their stories to be told in their own words.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research on divorce has been a major topic of controversy and scholarly interest for decades (Amato, 2010; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). One of the reasons for this interest is the serious consequences of divorce and the elevated number of individuals it affects nationwide. The exact number of divorces taking place in the United States (U.S.) every year is not known because states like California and Louisiana do not submit these figures to the federal government on a regular basis (Amato, 2010). What is known, however, is that a quarter of all first marriages end in disruption by their eighth year (Pinsof, 2002) and half or more of all marriages end sometime after that (Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011).

The crude divorce rate (the number of divorces per 1,000 people in the population) rose 136% from 1960 to 1980 (Amato, 2010). This rate dropped in 2006 due to increased education of the marrying couple and their age at the time of marriage (Amato, 2010). At present, the incidence of divorce is high even though a percentage of marriages end in permanent separation rather than divorce (Pinsof, 2002).

In 1998, about 85% of all relationships ended in divorce after 20 years of marriage, just in the state of Florida (Pinsof, 2002). Now, more than 23% of the total population is divorced in the city of Miami alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Experts predict that up to 65% of all marriages in the nation will end in divorce (Christenson, Zabriskie, Eggett, & Freeman, 2006; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011). Many of these divorces will take place within the Hispanic population as their numbers and stressors continue to increase and affect marital stability (Amato, 2010; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009).

Statement of the Research Problem

Divorce rates vary among population groups (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). According to Amato (2010), Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites have similar divorce rates, but Hispanics tend to separate permanently rather than divorce more so than non-Hispanic Whites. The researcher also reported that 42% of Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites divorce within the first two years of marriage. The chances that the marriage could end in divorce or separation within the first 20 years are: 48% for Whites, 52% for Hispanics, and 63% for Blacks (Pinsof, 2002).

Differences exist among Hispanic groups themselves as some are more prone to divorce than others (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Puerto Ricans, considered one of the most economically disadvantaged minority groups in the U.S. (Amato, 2010), have the highest incidence of divorce (60%) compared to Cubans, Mexicans, and Central Americans (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Mexican Americans born in the U. S., another economically disadvantaged population in the U.S., have the lowest divorce rate (Zhang & Van Hook, 2009), but they divorce more frequently than Mexicans born in Mexico (Amato, 2010).

Immigration to the U.S. impacts family life and the chance for divorce among Hispanics (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). About 90% first generation Hispanics (those born in their country of origin) marry first generation Hispanic spouses (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). In other words, most men born in Cuba marry women born in Cuba. Once they immigrate, however, Hispanics are more likely to marry non-Hispanic Whites than other minority groups as they are more flexible in their racial or ethnic identification and may identify themselves as multiracial (Zhang & Van Hook, 2009).

Unfortunately, mixed marriages involving Hispanics (e.g., Hispanic-White) are the least stable and have a high risk of divorce only preceded by Blacks (Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). As evidence, Mexican Americans are more likely to marry within their own culture, thus most Mexican American women (85%) marry and have children with Mexican American men. Apparently, this cultural practice or custom among Mexican Americans contributes to their lower divorce rate when compared to other Hispanic groups (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Besides Hispanics, older adults (those older than 55; see definition of *late-life* below), are also incurring in high divorce rates (Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Wu and Schimmele (2007) affirmed that older adults are divorcing more than ever before even though the likelihood of being married is supposed to increase with age. In 2001, approximately 300,000 Americans age 55 or older experienced divorce or separation. In 2004, 64% of those 65 and older ended their marriages after ten or more years while 32% did the same after 20 or more years. The increased number of divorcees among the older population is reason for added concern.

Regardless of the seriousness of the problem and the large body of literature on the subject of divorce (Amato, 2010; Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009; Meltzer, 2011), little research has been conducted on divorce among either population group. A browse of the PsycInfo database in December, 2011 generated 12,466 articles on divorce, but only 17 of them related to Hispanics and older adults. Research on the topic of divorce involving older Hispanics is urgently needed.

Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative studies regarding Hispanics who divorce in late-life and, more specifically, studies that report the divorce experience in the

voices of the subjects themselves (Yin, 2004). Qualitative research studies that allow older Hispanics to relate their divorce experiences are almost nonexistent. Of the 17 published articles found on divorce, Hispanics, and older adults, only two involved qualitative research.

The literature has failed to represent Hispanics and older adults in research and has published general research methodologies (e.g., longitudinal studies) that cannot successfully and accurately describe the reality of these groups' experiences with divorce (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). The present study bridged this gap by increasing knowledge concerning the experience of Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life and using case study as the qualitative research method chosen by the researcher; one that enabled participants to tell their stories in their own words.

Phenomenon of interest. Oropesa and Landale (2004) provided statistics regarding divorce rates in Latin American and Caribbean countries which now grant citizens the right to divorce legally. According to the scholars, Chile was the last country in which divorce was legalized (in 2003) and the reason why the incidence of divorce in this country is lower than in more developed Latin American countries. Cohabitation has also become a more frequent and common practice in these countries compared to the U.S., especially among the working class and poorer sectors of the population.

Contrary to what is happening in their countries of origin, Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. prefer marriage over cohabitation (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). This is the case for Mexicans living in the U.S. who are more likely to marry (48%) than to cohabit (41%) in comparison to Mexicans living in Mexico (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). These new cultural practices, whether inside or outside their native countries, represent a

significant (and distressing) variation of Hispanics' traditional views on marriage and divorce.

Experts have announced two important and concerning demographic changes taking place in the U. S.; one is the continued growing numbers of Hispanics, and the other one is their withdrawal from marriage (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). In 2002, more than 40% of those who were granted permanent residency came from Latin American and Caribbean countries (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). By 2007, the number of Hispanics in the U.S. made up 13.7% of the total population with more than 40 million people (Hernandez et al., 2007). Gradually, Hispanics have become the nation's largest ethnic minority group (Christenson et al., 2006).

The Hispanic population continues to grow as other population groups either diminish in numbers (e.g., non-Hispanic Whites) or remain approximately the same (e.g., African Americans; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Predictions for 2050 are for the number of Hispanics to double and represent more than 25% of the total U.S. population while the non-Hispanic White population will decrease to about 50%, African Americans will represent about 15%, and Asians will compose about 10% (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

The increased growth in the Hispanic population has been caused by the excess of births over deaths (natural increase); therefore, it will remain unabated for decades to come whether immigration laws restrict Hispanics' entrance to this country or not (Johnson & Lichter, 2008). It is therefore important to learn and understand as much about Hispanics' customs and demographic characteristics as possible before trying to understand their experiences with divorce.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003), Hispanics

prefer to live in the South and the West rather than the Northeast and the Midwest areas of the nation. In 2002, more than 44% of Hispanics (mainly Mexicans) lived in the West (e.g., California) and 33.2% (mostly Puerto Ricans and Cubans) lived in the South (e.g., Florida). At this time, Hispanics represent 50% of the population in metro areas and about 50% of the natural increase (Johnson & Lichter, 2008). About 14% of Hispanics are between 45 and 64 years of age and the proportion 65 and older is about 23% in the Cuban population alone. Their households are usually composed of more than five people (Johnson & Lichter, 2008).

Ramirez and De la Cruz (2003) indicated that Hispanics' educational attainment varies among groups. More than 70% of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Central and South Americans older than 25 years of age graduate from high school compared to 51% of Mexicans. Nonetheless, Hispanics aged 25 and older are less likely to graduate from high school (57%) than non-Hispanic Whites (88%). Approximately 27% of Hispanics complete ninth-grade education or lower and only 11.1% have a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to 29.4% of non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003). This is valuable information because individuals with high school diplomas or lower formal education have more unstable marriages than do individuals with a college or higher level of education (Amato, 2010).

Ramirez and De la Cruz (2003) also reported that more than 8% of Hispanics in the labor force aged 16 and older were unemployed in 2002 with the highest percentage (9.6%) being Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Compared to non-Hispanic Whites, Hispanics are more likely to work in service occupations (22% versus 12% respectively) and twice as likely to be operators and laborers. Only 14% of Hispanics hold a managerial or

professional occupation and, in general, they earn less than non-Hispanic Whites with Mexicans earning the lowest income among all groups (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

Not surprisingly, more than 21% of Hispanics lived in poverty in 2002 compared to 7.8% of non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003). Thus Hispanics are educationally and financially disadvantaged when compared to other U.S. population groups, especially non-Hispanic Whites. The increasing number of divorce among Hispanics is also pronounced when compared to other population groups.

Based on data from the 1998, 2000, and 2002 current Population Surveys (CPS), Oropesa and Landale (2004) found that approximately 50% of Hispanics were divorced in comparison to 43% of non-Hispanic Whites and Asians. The researchers also reported that the number of Hispanics who were widowed, divorced, or separated was almost double (20%) the number of other ethnic groups (e.g., Asians). Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that about 8% of the total Hispanic population will be divorced by 2050 while less structured civil unions (e.g., cohabitation) becoming more common. To make matters worse, this predicted increase in the number of divorces among Hispanics will be impacted by changes within the Hispanic population itself.

Oropesa and Landale (2004) explained that, eventually, the Hispanic population in the U.S. will be mostly composed of those from the second and third generations. This means that acculturation and assimilation (defined below) into the more individualistic American culture will reduce Hispanics' commitment to family and marriage as they choose personal freedom, personal choices, and personal fulfillment above all else. In other words, as future generations of Hispanics increase their tendency to satisfy individual emotional and psychological needs, they will opt to abandon their marriages

and families when feeling unhappy and unfulfilled. Higher incidences of divorce among Hispanics can therefore be expected in the near future.

Changes in the older U.S. population deserve equal attention and consideration. It has been predicted that a growing number of individuals will experience a major transition in family life during their old age (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). The numbers were already high five years ago when up to 15% of those who divorced were between 50 and 54 years of age, 7% were between 55 and 59 years of age, and 4% were 60 and older (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Predictions are for these numbers to continue growing as reduced commitment to the family and increased divorce rates are now characteristic of this population group (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010) which is living longer years and healthier lives (Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

According to Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010), there is a growing interest in the older population because of its increasing numbers which are already impacting the availability and efficacy of current social and economic support systems and services they are provided with. The increased interest is evident in the growing number of literary publications that now deal with relationships and family issues such as divorce among older individuals (e.g., *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, and *Journal of Gerontology*). Apparently, exploring the high incidence of divorce among older Hispanic adults is a phenomenon of scholarly interest and crucial to better understand their experiences of divorce, identify their needs, and provide them with high-quality professional services.

Background and justification. Immigration since the 1970s and high fertility rates – considered higher than in any other population group – have been responsible for

the fast and large growth of Hispanics in the U.S. (Johnson & Lichter, 2008; Suro & Passel, 2003). The Hispanic population grew by 25.7 million between 1970 and 2000 and is expected to represent 23% of the total population with Hispanic workers alone composing 64% of the total labor force by 2050 (Suro & Passel, 2003; Toossi, 2002), but their lives as immigrants in the U.S. will be hard and sad.

According to Oropesa and Landale (2004), Hispanic immigrants face animosity from both the American society and the American government due to their non-White, undocumented immigration status, and drug trafficking activities in their countries. Hispanic immigrants lack the language and education required to successfully incorporate into the American society; thus, they suffer discrimination, experience income inequality, and lack the social and economic opportunities granted to other population groups.

Parra-Cardona, Cordova, Holtrop, Villarruel, and Wieling (2008) corroborated that Hispanics are treated based on preconceptions and stereotypes and continue to suffer discrimination, especially in education and at work. Hispanics do not have the resources either. Counseling services previously offered have been affected by budget cuts. The rejection Hispanics immigrant experience, combined with their inability to achieve social and economic stability as well as the limited resources available to them, affect their perceptions about the world and family life; thus, contribute to unstable marriages and higher incidences of divorce.

Marital instability among Hispanics has been studied for decades by researchers such as Frisbie (1986). After conducting a two-year longitudinal research, Frisbie found that patterns of marital instability were similar among Hispanic groups when compared to other groups. Frisbie concluded that the incidence of divorce went from very low among

Cuban, Mexican American, and Anglo women to relatively high among Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Mexican American women enjoyed stability depending on their level of education. Cuban females represented about 14% of those who were divorced; a rate higher than that found among Blacks.

Scholars and sociologists (Bratter & King, 2008; Heard, 2007) continue to study these changing family patterns and trends among racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. reflecting higher incidence of marital disruption among Hispanics than other population groups. Heard (2007) reported that 63% of Hispanic families are composed of two biological parents in comparison to 70% of non-Hispanic Whites and 80% of Asians. These demographic and socioeconomic aspects must be considered when explaining Hispanics' divorce experiences (Bratter & King, 2008; Bulanda & Brown, 2006).

Considerations should also be made regarding the older population for two main reasons. Firstly, this population group is increasing in numbers as the baby boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) gets older (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Secondly, these older adults will undergo profound changes as they live longer and healthier lives (Toossi, 2002).

In 2000, those 55 and older represented about 13% of the labor force, but they are expected to grow to 20% by 2030 (Toossi, 2002; Weller, 2003). Many of them will also receive a bachelor's degree by this time (*Public*, 2003). Their increased numbers combined with longer life expectancies, more years in the work force and higher education are all changing family relationships and marital dynamics for older adults who do not want to remain in unhappy marriages (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). These facts cannot be overlooked because there is a high probability of being divorced in late-life.

The growing numbers within both the divorced Hispanic and older populations are already exerting great impact on the nation's civic, cultural, social, and political circles and calling attention from political, economic, and social strategists and executives alike (Hernandez et al., 2008). These population groups require (and deserve) deeper understanding of their cultural and social practices as well as their values, attitudes, and behaviors (Christenson et al., 2006) and their increasing incidence of divorce (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research method (case study) has been chosen as the most appropriate to address adjustment among Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life. It allows the researcher to make a deep and detailed study of this current and serious phenomenon by probing into the complex process of divorce and showing how it is experienced and perceived by this population group (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative research methods have been used since late 1800s and have appeared in social science research since the 1930s with a study on immigrants in Chicago (Creswell, 2008).

Qualitative research has undergone positive changes throughout the centuries with the introduction and application of new designs, methods, and procedures including: narrative research, case studies, observations, and interviews (Creswell, 2008). Numerous collaborative approaches have been incorporated and allowed exploration of racial and ethnic issues with better insight into their social contexts (Morrow, 2007). In Psychology, qualitative methods developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the use of observations, data diaries, and case studies from recognized scholars like Freud and Maslow (Morrow, 2007).

Conducting a qualitative research increases understanding of the Hispanics' views regarding their experiences of divorce by allowing the collection of data in their own homes or offices or any other site (e.g., support group setting) where they can openly share their experiences (Creswell, 2008). The qualitative research provides an opportunity for their stories to be told in their own words (Yin, 2003). It also allows researchers to advocate for social change while adding to the field of multiculturalism by involving two minority groups – Hispanics and older adults – largely ignored in research (Britigan et al., 2009).

The ability of the researcher to conduct the study was based on the availability of older Hispanics in Miami-Dade to participate in the study. Prospect participants were approached by the researcher after they were identified within a local religious support group for divorcees. They were explained details of the study before obtaining their written consent and securing their participation.

Relevance to the Discipline

As minorities, both Hispanics and older adults are generally misrepresented and disadvantaged (compared to non-Hispanic Whites) as their families disintegrate through divorce (Britigan et al., 2009; Bulanda & Brown, 2006; Heard, 2007). Such misrepresentation affects how mental health professionals perceive their situation and respond to their needs (Bratter & King, 2008; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Besides, mental health issues are common within immigrant populations (Bratter & King, 2008; Salgado de Snyder, Cervantes & Padilla, 1990). This fact will be analyzed in the following two studies which, although outdated, cannot be disregarded due to their significance to the present research project and the limited literature focused on this population group.

In a study with Hispanic immigrants, Salgado de Snyder et al. (1990) showed that Hispanics suffered mental health issues, especially stress and symptoms of depression related to their immigration to the U.S. The study was conducted across schools in Los Angeles and involved 264 immigrants and 329 citizens. Most of the immigrants (73%) were Catholics of about 24 years of age, with approximately 13 years of education. Most of them were employed, single, and without children. After being administered the Hispanic Stress Inventory (HSI) developed by the researchers, and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), results showed a close and direct relationship between immigration stress and generalized psychological distress. Immigrant females showed higher levels of stress related to Cultural/Family Conflict, increased generalized distress, and higher levels of depression when compared with immigrant males.

Salgado de Snyder et al. (1990) revealed that, besides guilt about leaving behind family, friends, and communities, immigrants must adapt to a new language and culture when they enter the U.S. They may have also suffered political prison and violence in their own countries and must then deal with immigration issues and reduced employment opportunities when they arrive. Although both men and women must cope with the same stressors, immigrant women suffer added stress by having to perform multiple roles, including those of wives and mothers. Moving from a social system that assigns specific roles to males and females in their native countries to one in which greater freedom among sex roles is possible (and a financial necessity) can deeply affect immigrants' self-identity and result in personal and family conflict.

Garzon and Tan (1992) confirmed that, for Hispanic women, acculturation to

western attitudes, new sex roles, and limited opportunities of employment can generate conflicts, challenge traditional family structures, and diminish their submissive roles.

However, ingrained cultural patterns and attitudes will continue to emphasize the husband and the intact family as valuable to women's identity and self-esteem.

According to the authors, these constructs contribute to the development of mental health conditions within the immigrant Hispanic population especially after divorce.

To make matters worse, Hispanics do not use psychological services as much as non-Hispanic Whites and drop out of psychotherapy after the first session more frequently than non-Hispanic Whites due to their perceptions and attitudes toward mental health disorders and treatments (Cabassa, Lester & Zayas, 2007). It is also known that the development of mental health disorders increases with the length of time the immigrant has lived in the U.S. (Goodkind, Gonzalez, Malcoe, & Espinosa, 2008).

Cabassa et al. (2007) asserted that Hispanics' attitudes toward mental health disorders influence their decisions to seek professional help, adhere to treatment, and the coping strategies used. In a study conducted among 95 Hispanic immigrants, the researchers found that participants viewed family conflicts and lack of emotional support from family members as the causes of their depression. Most of them perceived their faith in God and asking for forgiveness as important coping strategies and many sought treatment from non-professionals, such as a priest.

Furthermore, Parra-Cardona et al. (2008) stated that Hispanics are suspicious of service providers in social settings due to their experiences with discrimination. In addition, family therapists might not always be sensitive and aware of the Hispanics' individual life experiences and may, instead, assess their needs by making generalizations

among groups (e.g., foreign born and U.S. born). The researchers concluded that the Hispanic population is disadvantaged in receiving appropriate mental health care services and that the specific interests and needs of sub-groups (e.g., divorced individuals) go unnoticed. Hispanics are unable to access resources because they continue to be neglected in the development of programs and clinical research addressing their psychological needs which in turn keep them feeling oppressed and demoralized.

The end of long-term marriages and the incidence of divorce among older Hispanic adults are affecting these individuals' psychological functioning (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Kingston, 2007), but they are not finding the help they need and deserve from the mental health professional community (Cabassa et al., 2007; Parra-Cardona et al., 2008). Meanwhile, the changing marriage and divorce trends among those 55 and older are impacting their level of life satisfaction and general well-being (Kingston, 2007). These changing trends are justified by the potential to live longer years and the more "liberal, permissive attitudes about self-fulfillment, belonging, and individual behaviors" (Wu & Schimmele, 2007, p. 42). Regardless of the causes, older Hispanic adults must deal with broken marriages and adjustment issues after divorce.

Adjustment after divorce becomes a challenging experience as older individuals struggle with major barriers such as depression, loneliness, and financial difficulties (Kingston, 2007). Not surprisingly, about 63% of women and 44% of men who divorce in late-life experience intolerable levels of stress and about 31% of women and 18% of men face depression (Amato, 2010). Despite its distressing effects, however, most individuals are able to adjust and reach psychological growth after divorce (Amato, 2010; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). They can reach healing, emotional insight, hardiness, and

personal resilience (East, Jackson, Obrien, & Peters, 2010). The ability for this population group to adjust to life after divorce must therefore be studied and understood.

Notwithstanding, the limited research available for older Hispanic adults who experience divorce in late-life affects practitioners' views regarding the phenomenon of divorce among this minority group (Britigan, Murnan, & Rojas-Guyler, 2009; Pinsof, 2002). It results in paradigms that only relate to problems, fears, and very few choices for divorced individuals and their families (Bernstein, 2007). Mental health professionals dealing with divorce must increase their knowledge and understanding on how to help divorcees stabilize stress and develop the skills to adjust (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007; Krumrei et al., 2009). The present study fulfills these needs by increasing literature on the topic and enhancing mental health practitioners' ability to effectively assess and treat older Hispanic adults before, during, and after divorce.

Deficiencies in the evidence. The current literature regarding divorce is abundant with more than 1,200 published literary works found in PsycInfo database alone. Nonetheless, most of these publications focus on younger adults (Krumrei et al., 2009) who have been recently divorced (Amato, 2000; Meltzer, 2011) and come from a generally privileged segment of the population (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Not much is known about racial and ethnic differences regarding divorce adjustment as research studies regarding minorities are scarce (Amato, 2010). Within the few published, less than 10% of family research focuses on Hispanic families (Christenson et al., 2006).

In addition, there are contradictions and opposing views about the impact of divorce. According to Amato (2000), some blame divorce as a significant source of social problems while others perceive it as a benevolent force that provides adults with another

chance to be happy and escape dysfunctional relationships and problematic households. Most literature focuses on the negative aspects of divorce and the few possibilities thereafter (Amato, 2010; Meltzer, 2011; Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Very few assert that adjustment and psychological growth is possible (Bernstein, 2007) and even fewer consider such possibilities among those who experience divorce in late-life (Krumrei et al., 2009; Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Research findings are dispersed and confusing. In order to fairly and accurately support the interests of Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life, attention must be paid to what they understand and how they perceive their divorce. Attention must also be paid to the strategies used to adjust. A better understanding of the constructs that foster divorce adjustment among older Hispanic adults can emerge when more research studies are conducted on the subject. As Amato (2010) affirmed:

Continuing research on the contingencies that determine whether divorce has positive, neutral, or negative long-term consequences for adults and children is a high priority...as long as nearly half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce, there will be an enduring need to understand and monitor the implications of marital dissolution for adults, children, and the larger society (p. 1281).

Conducting this research study bridged gaps, reduced contradictions, and cleared up confusions as it allowed: (a) a deeper understanding of how adjustment is reached by Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life after more than 15 years of marriage, (b) increased insight and reduction of misunderstandings or stigmas from health care practitioners toward divorced, older Hispanic adults in Miami, (c) contribution to existing literature regarding divorce adjustment, and (d) personal and professional growth through increased understanding of how this population group perceives and adjusts to the divorce experience.

Audience. Hispanics and older adults are being affected by changing trends in family life and the increased tendency to end their marriages. They are also being affected by results in the limited research available and the partial understanding of their psychological needs and wants from mental health practitioners. Results of the present study benefit the Hispanic population who has experienced divorce in late-life by increasing understanding of their experience of divorce and their lives thereafter.

With knowledge gained from this study, mental health professionals and religious leaders are able to develop and implement effective therapeutic interventions and programs to assess and treat this population's psychological needs. Social workers are able to predict and accommodate the necessary resources (e.g., housing and finances) to help Hispanic individuals and families recover from divorce. The same way, fellow students and researchers benefit from a study using a qualitative research approach which is lacking in the literature pool.

Definition of Terms

Adjustment. According to Kitson and Morgan (1990), adjustment to divorce is accomplished when the divorced individual is "relatively free of signs and symptoms of physical or mental illness;...able to function adequately in the daily role responsibilities of home, family, work,...and (has) developed an independent identity that is (separate from) the status of being married or...the ex-spouse" (p. 913). Wang and Amato (2000) assert that "Adjustment involves believing that the divorce was a good idea, perceiving positive outcomes of divorce, no longer being preoccupied with the former spouse and marriage, and psychologically 'moving on' with one's life" (p. 667).

Hispanics. Also called Latinos, are those born in (first generation) or descendants

of those born in (second generation) a Caribbean, Central, or South American country (Landale, Oropesa & Bradatan, 2006). According to Heard (2007), Hispanics are mostly "...composed of first- and second-generation immigrants who came to the United States seeking economic success..." (p. 325). The terms Hispanics or Latinos increased in popularity after the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 to identify the racial and ethnic identities of those who came from Latin America, but can have ambiguous meaning because they include individuals from different nationalities (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Regardless, the terms are used throughout the present study to conveniently identify these immigrant groups. First generation Hispanics are also referred as Hispanic immigrants in this study.

For the purpose of this study, participants were first generation Hispanics who primarily speak Spanish at home, although they may speak English as well. The first generation of Hispanics was selected as they were most likely to have been married (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). No ethnic labels or cultural identifiers (Oropesa & Landale, 2004) were used (e.g., Chicano to identify someone born in Mexico). Instead, participants were identified by their country of origin, such as Mexican or Puerto Rican for someone born in Mexico or Puerto Rico respectively.

Acculturation. According to Christenson et al. (2006), acculturation is the process of adapting one's culture of origin to the new, dominant one in the United States as evidenced by changes in the immigrant's behavior and attitudes. Acculturation is different from length of time in the country or generational status and it is also different for each person or family. Acculturation (also called *biculturalism*) is impacted by the frequency of contact or interaction of the immigrant with services, media, people, schools

and the community at large with the dominant American culture (Christenson et al., 2006). Acculturation has been measured, for instance, by the preference of Mexican-Americans for certain leisure activities or visits to recreational areas in comparison to those chosen by Anglo-Americans to conclude that the former spend more time in sedentary activities like picnics and watching sports when compared with Anglo-Americans (Christenson et al., 2006).

Acculturation can affect the stability within the Hispanic family. Low levels of acculturation among first generation immigrants mean higher risks of divorce when compared to bicultural families due to all stressors the lowly acculturated family must experience (Christenson et al., 2006). On the other hand, second and third-generation of immigrant Hispanics increase their incidence of divorce by valuing personal freedom, self-fulfillment, and self-actualization as part of their cultural ideals and norms (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

Late-life. Dworetzky (1997) considers middle adulthood the ages between 40 and 65, but for the purpose of this study, late-life will follow more modern descriptions. Toossi (2002) refers to those 55 and older when describing the baby boomer generation. In their article, *Uncoupling in Late-Life*, Wu and Schimmele (2007) also consider those who are 55 years of age and up as belonging to 'late-life'. This population group will also be referred as 'older adults' throughout this study.

Purpose of the Study

The overriding purpose of this research study was to explore and increase understanding of the complex process of divorce as experienced by older Hispanic adults in Miami-Dade County. The main focus was on these individuals' experiences and

perceptions of divorce as well as on the coping mechanisms used to adjust. The ultimate goal of this study was to provide insights and constructive suggestions for Hispanics who experienced divorce late in life and after long-term marriages as well as to improve mental health professionals' understanding, assessment, and treatment of this population's divorce experience.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Most literary publications focus on the negative aspects of divorce (Hughes & Waite, 2009; Meltzer, 2011); however, many experts affirm that adjustment post-divorce can be accomplished (Amato, 2010; Qualls, 2008). More than adjustment, there is potential for growth and development (Leighman, 2009; Meltzer, 2011). There is also a chance for self-fulfillment and even happiness after divorce (East et al., 2010). Experts disagree about the specific contributors to adjustment. Some explain that certain realities, such as initiating the divorce, foster adjustment (Wang & Amato, 2000) while others maintain that adjustment is not related to who initiates the divorce (Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

What is known and agreed upon is that more than half of the married Hispanic population eventually divorces (Landale et al., 2006; Pinsof, 2002) and that this number will continue to increase as older adults end their marriages to fulfill new life goals (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Despite this unsettling fact, the literature fails to represent Hispanics in research. Therefore, it also fails to describe their experiences with divorce accurately (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010).

This literature review starts with a brief historical background about the rising divorce rates in the U.S., its causes, consequences, and the challenge represented by the increased number of divorcees within the older Hispanic population. The effects of divorce, both negative and positive, are discussed to show how distressing this period of life can be and the possibility of reaching adjustment despite all the challenges. Stress and coping theories are then identify the constructs involved in divorce adjustment. Each

of these constructs is explained for a better understanding of how they contribute to adjustment. Cultural challenges for Hispanics are identified paying special attention to how religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices can influence their adjustment post-divorce. Most of these observations have been made recently, but others have been made a decade before. Given the limited literature on Hispanics and the significance of these ‘outdated’ articles to the present study, they should be included in this review.

Historical context. Divorce was taboo fifty years ago when reduced life expectancy, conservative divorce laws, and social attitudes stopped couples from separating (Amato, 2010; Meltzer, 2011). Marriages only ended when a spouse died (Pinsof, 2002). Attitudes and perceptions toward marriage and divorce began to change with the introduction of the Family Law Act (or no-fault divorce) in the 1960s (Meltzer, 2011). The act granted the legal right to divorce when differences between the couple were considered irreconcilable (Meltzer, 2011). As a result, there was a 136% increase in the nation’s divorce rate from 1960 to 1980 (Amato, 2010). By 1985, divorce was a common practice in the U.S. (Meltzer, 2011).

Divorce rate also rose due to women’s economic autonomy during the last 30 years (Pinsof, 2002). From 1980 to 1997, the percentage of married, working women increased from 50% to 65% and their earnings increased from 60% to 74% in comparison to men’s (Pinsof, 2002). Financial independence and frequent conflicts with husbands related to sharing home chores allowed (and encouraged) women to divorce (Darling, Coccia, & Senatore, 2012; Meltzer, 2011). In 2006, increased age and education of the individuals getting married reduced the high incidence of divorce (Amato, 2010), but experts predict that up to 65% of all marriages in the nation will end in divorce in the

years to come (Christenson et al., 2006; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011).

Among older adults, increased life expectancy has contributed to high divorce rates (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). The average lifespan for White Americans increased over 25 years, rising from 51 to 80 for women and from 48 to 72 for men (Pinsof, 2002). For non-White Americans (e.g., Hispanics), it increased over 30 years (Pinsof, 2002). With longer lives, older Hispanic adults are making dramatic changes as they adopt more liberal thinking patterns and seek new dreams and goals outside unfulfilling marriages (Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Wu and Schimmele (2007) explained that, until recently, first marriages that ended in divorce lasted an average of about eight years with an average age of 39 for males and 37 for females. Despite the number of years married, these ages are now increasing and people are divorcing at older ages. Up to 7% of divorced individuals are between 55 and 59 and 4% of them are over 60. In 2001, approximately 300,000 Americans age 55 and older were divorced or separated and the numbers will increase as older adults grow apart from their spouses, decrease their levels of commitment, and ultimately want a personal change (Amato, 2010; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). At the turn of the century, about 85% of all relationships ended in divorce after 20 years of marriage in the state of Florida (Pinsof, 2002).

The number of divorcees will continue to increase within the Hispanic population due to immigration and acculturation issues (Amato, 2010). Immigration increases marital instability among Hispanics as they marry into different ethnic or racial groups (Amato, 2010). Acculturation equally contributes to divorce as Hispanics adopt Western (more individualistic) values and cultural practices emphasizing self-fulfillment and

happiness and disregarding traditional values placed on the family unit (Christenson et al., 2006).

Haro-Givetz (2009) substantiated these assertions by conducting a mixed-method research study exploring the relationships between Hispanic attitudes toward divorce and acculturation among other variables. The researcher administered verbal questionnaires to 84 Hispanics (32 men and 52 women) between 20 and 67 years of age. The researcher found that Hispanics are willing to evaluate their specific circumstances when considering divorce as an option.

In other words, Hispanics are open to dissolving their marriages when they believe that their relationship is troubled or when they feel unhappy. Others agree that the number of single parent homes among older Hispanic adults is on the rise (Amato, 2010; Padilla & Borrero, 2006). Currently, more than 23% of the total population is divorced in the city of Miami alone; a city characterized by an increasing number of older Hispanic adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

In sum, history has shown that divorce has affected and will continue to affect an increasing number of individuals and many of them are older Hispanic adults. This fact represents a challenge that must be addressed. As Wu and Schimmele (2007) stated, “The overall U.S. divorce rate is a well-established barometer of the degree to which societal ideals and goals have an individualistic orientation,...and that the modern marital relationship is not considered a sanctified, unbreakable contract” (p. 42). There is a dire need for professionals in the fields of mental health and education to increase knowledge of how older Hispanic adults perceive and adjust to their experience of divorce. In order to do this, the consequences of divorce must first be considered.

Outcomes of Divorce

Negative outcomes. Divorce is a stressful transition in life involving emotional crises, behavioral changes, and overall chaos (Amato, 2010; Bodenmann et al., 2007). It increases the chances of incurring in medical, legal, financial, and social costs (Meltzer, 2011; Qualls, 2008). Divorce affects individuals by destroying relationships within the family unit, frequent arguments and conflicts between spouses, emotional and financial losses, and a number of other negative life events, such as having to move (Amato, 2010; Goodkind et al., 2008; Padilla & Borrero, 2006). Many divorced individuals suffer from unhappiness, poor self-concepts, and social isolation (Amato, 2010). They report symptoms of physical and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Amato, 2010; Hughes & Waite, 2009; Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

According to Lepine and Briley (2011), depression following an experience like divorce causes significant distress by affecting cognitive abilities, social functioning, and daily performance. It reduces quality of life and productivity at work while increasing absenteeism. This, in turn, results in lower income and unemployment for the affected individual and his family as well as a loss of \$36.6 billion per year for the U.S. There is a prevalence of depression of about 9%, a risk of suicide of about 20%, and increased risks of mortality among those who divorce. The chances to suffer depression after divorce are similar for Whites, Blacks, and Mexican Americans (Amato, 2000).

Divorce in late-life can be as detrimental and results in numerous psychological, social, emotional, and economic repercussions (Amato, 2010; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Anger, loneliness, and fears develop from the losses incurred, the inability to establish new intimate relationships, and the uncertainty about their ability to adjust (Amato,

2010). About 60% of older adults experience severe stress and about 30% face depression after their marriages dissolve (Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Older adults also suffer lower Subjective Well-Being (SWB) – related to happiness, psychological well-being, morale, and a positive view of life when compared to younger and married individuals (George, 2010).

Undoubtedly, divorce can be a stressful, painful, and even fatal transition in life. This fact confirms the need for increased research on the subject as well as the development of more effective assessment and treatment programs. Provided with adequate resources, divorced individuals can overcome this painful transition in their lives and eventually enjoy the benefits of divorce, as many eventually do (Amato, 2000; Darling et al., 2012; Mandelbaum, 2011).

Positive outcomes. According to Amato (2000), individuals who experienced extreme distress during their marriage show reduced symptoms of depression after divorce. Those who struggled with frequent conflicts and problems during the marriage can function generally well later. More than reduced distress and improved functioning, Amato (2010) affirmed that divorce involves benefits and positive changes including higher levels of autonomy and personal growth for divorced individuals. Many others agree (Darling et al., 2012; Leighman, 2009; Miller, 2009).

Leighman (2009) conducted a case study of seven mid-life divorced women in Texas. The researcher used in-depth interviews and visual interpretations of the women's drawings before, during, and after divorce. Leighman found that autonomy, resilience, personal achievement and spiritual growth were all outcomes of divorce among the seven participants.

Still others propose that divorce is related to personal choice, continuous self-betterment and self-fulfillment (Darling et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2010). It is related to nurturing and maintaining healthy relationships as well as the ability to identify, express, and control emotions (Jenkins, 2010). Each of these accomplishments is conducive to psychological growth (Darling et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2010; Miller, 2009).

Regarding older adults, Wu and Schimmele (2007) maintained that the search for a happier life outweighs any strain or stress experienced during the divorce transition period. Many older adults describe life after divorce in positive terms. They report self-fulfillment, newly-found freedom, and newly-developed identities. They may even express relief after ending a bad marriage because they do not have to interact with or care for someone they have stopped loving.

Successful adjustment is thus possible for other adults because divorce can reduce their distress, improve their functioning levels, and help them reach psychological growth. The possibility is, however, determined by how divorcees respond to the stress of divorce (Miller, 2009; Wang & Amato, 2000).

Theoretical Approaches to Divorce Adjustment

Numerous concepts and theoretical approaches have been used to explain divorce adjustment. Among them, stress-and-coping perspectives seem to be the most common (Amato, 2000; Goodkind et al., 2008; Wang & Amato, 2000). A review of two of these perspectives can help identify the constructs involved in divorce adjustment.

Divorce-stress-adjustment. Amato (2000) combined different elements of stress theories and developed a *divorce-stress-adjustment* view. The view suggests that marital disruption or dissolution starts while the couple still lives together and ends years after

the divorce is legalized. It also suggests that the initiator of the divorce adjusts faster and better by mourning the end of the relationship before it actually ends.

According to Amato's (2000) perspective, most divorced individuals experience stress because they expect or hope their marriages to be a supportive and rewarding experience that will last until they die. When the relationship dissolves or disintegrates, many individuals spend time negotiating with the ex-spouse, seeking advice from others, or simply avoiding the problem. Divorced individuals experience persistent or chronic stress related to economic hardships, loneliness, and parental responsibilities but, eventually, most of them adjust and return to previous functional levels. Amato concluded that the ability to adjust depended, among other things, on: education, employment, support from a new relationship, and being the initiator of the divorce.

Family stress and coping. Similar suggestions were made by Wang and Amato (2000) who based their research study on the *family stress and coping theory*. This theory stipulates that people's adjustment to divorce depends on the ability to overcome or adapt to stressors (e.g., loss of relationships and moving), the availability of both personal resources (e.g., income and education) and social resources (e.g., friends and new intimate relationship), and the definitions attached to the experience. Based on this theory and its stipulations, the researchers attempted to identify contributors to divorce adjustment.

Wang and Amato (2000) conducted a 17 year longitudinal study using national data from 208 divorced individuals. They collected data before and after divorce. Participants were White and middle-class Hispanics, younger than 55 years of age who completed self-report measures and focused on specific forms of adjustment (e.g.,

perceptions of divorce, feelings during this time, and negative events incurred).

As result, Wang and Amato (2000) found better adjustment among those who initiated the divorce, those with less attachment to the ex-spouse, those with social resources (e.g., a new romantic relationship), and those who held positive outlooks toward divorce. They also found that it was harder for older adults to adjust than for younger ones. Although the study could benefit from the use of other forms of measurement (e.g., observations) and given that its results can only be generalized to White, middle-class Hispanics and not to every divorced Hispanic, the study corroborates that adjustment to divorce is possible, even for older Hispanic adults, given the conditions stipulated.

Interestingly, about 10 years before Wang and Amato published their findings Tschann, Johnston, and Wallerstein (1989) conducted a similar longitudinal study, applied the same model of *family stress and coping* to the crisis of divorce, and arrived at similar conclusions. Tschann et al. (1989) measured the emotional and psychological adjustment of 146 women and 144 men after divorce.

Participants in the study were parents from 184 divorcing families in San Francisco with a family income averaging \$35,000 per year. They were well-educated and averaged of 38 years of age. They had been married for more than 10 years and separated for less than one year. By the end of the study, 33% of the women and 45% of the men had remarried or had a new romantic partner. Participants completed questionnaires, sentence completion tasks, standardized instruments, and the Divorce Apperception Test.

Results showed that adjustment depended on a balanced interaction among

stressors, resources, and attachment to the former spouse. Stressors such as decreased income and conflict with the ex-spouse impacted adjustment directly and increased negative attachment. Developing better social resources was conducive to a more positive post-divorce adjustment as those who remarried reported more happiness, less loneliness, and less anxiety than those who did not. It was also found that psychological functioning before separation was an important personal resource, especially for women, and included resolution of the emotional attachment to the ex-spouse. Attachment was resolved when individuals maintained a balanced perception of the positive and negative aspects regarding the ex-spouse and the divorce experience.

Summarizing these findings and, in accordance with the *stress-and-coping* theories reviewed, divorce adjustment involves: (a) the ability to cope with stressors, (b) the availability of social resources, (c) decreased level of attachment to the ex-spouse, and (d) positive perceptions regarding the divorce experience. These findings and conclusions served to guide data collection and analysis in the present research study by becoming the theoretical framework from which common themes and patterns may emerge. At this time, each of the constructs identified are considered for a better understanding of how they affect adjustment to the divorced population in general and to Hispanics in particular.

Stressors for Hispanics. Immigration and acculturation are periods of extreme stress for first generation Hispanics; however, not every Hispanic has the flexibility or tolerance of new practices (e.g., economic independence for women) required to succeed in the new cultural and social environments encountered in the U.S. (Christenson et al., 2006). Padilla and Borrero (2006) agreed that acculturation stress and reduced coping

skills of family members can affect marital stability among Hispanics and conduce to divorce. Stressors, such as limited job skills and increased poverty levels, add to the pressure of trying to acculturate to their new life and this affects traditional values such as marriage and family life. The authors concluded that Hispanics have learned to recognize divorce as an available (and valuable) coping skill and positive response to stressful marriages, especially for women.

Goodkind et al. (2008) also identified stressors affecting Hispanic immigrants after developing and applying an instrument derived from both the Hispanic Stress Inventory and the Latin American Stress Inventory. These stressors included the loss of social support systems they relied on before. Other stressors were: difficulty of accessing services because of language barriers, lower socioeconomic status, lack of health insurance, immigration and acculturation stress, conflicts with sex-roles, concerns about starting a family, racism and discrimination.

The researchers affirmed that the number of stressors increased with the time Hispanics spent in the U.S. as they seek services they cannot receive and opportunities they cannot reach (Goodkind et al., 2008). Among all Hispanics, immigrant women suffer higher levels of stress than men (Dew, 2009). They suffer greater economic losses during divorce (Dew, 2009). They also suffer from cultural conflicts as well as family and household issues such as parenting and working outside the house (Salgado de Snyder et al., 1990). Regardless, Hispanic men and women alike overcome stressors and hard life circumstances because of their ability to develop resilience (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008).

Resilience among Hispanics. Parra-Cardona et al. (2008) encouraged family

therapists to be aware of the powerful “sense of resilience” which increases Hispanics’ sense of commitment and “constitutes a unique motivation in their lives that fuels their sense of resolve in the midst of adversity” (p. 170). The authors asserted that, instead of focusing on the hardship or challenge, foreign born Hispanics are able to adapt to stress and adversities in the U.S. resulting from acculturation, discrimination, and changes in gender roles among others. According to the scholars, Hispanics develop resilience by: devising new and diverse life goals, imagining a better life in the future, committing themselves to pursuing new goals, and developing social relationships for support.

This is insightful information. According to the literature, Hispanics can adjust to the stress of divorce because of their capacity to be resilient. In addition, Hispanics rely on social resources to develop this resilience and cope with stressful events.

Social Resources and Adjustment

Individuals dissolve social bonds when they divorce as they separate from their ex-spouses, friends, and neighbors, but the level of distress following the dissolution of these social connections or bonds depends on the accessibility of social resources (Kramrei, Coit, Martin, Fogo, & Mahoney, 2007). Others agree that successful post-divorce adjustment and feelings of well-being result from having access to adequate social networks (Kramrei et al., 2007; McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2000) that allow divorced individuals to develop new social identities and integration to the community (Strine, Chapman, Balluz, & Mokdad, 2008; Wu and Schimmele, 2007).

House, Umberson, and Landis (1988) emphasized the positive relationship between social resources and divorce adjustment. According to the scholars, social resources can emerge from developing social support (e.g., going out with friends) and

also from becoming involved in an organization or community activity (e.g., going to church). Divorced individuals perceive the world, the event, or the experience in positive terms when provided with social and emotional support. House et al. (1988) concluded that the ability to adapt to stressful events such as divorce is directly and positively related to the development of supportive relationships. The researchers added that minority populations (e.g., Hispanics and the elderly) develop stronger patterns of social networks or supports as a way of adjusting to adversities.

About 10 years later, Strine et al. (2008) confirmed that accessibility of social resources provides social and emotional support to the divorced individual and that these resources are directly related to the divorcee's mental health. Lack of support is related to harmful behaviors such as: heavy drinking, obesity, and smoking. On the other hand, accessibility of social and emotional support is considered a resource that is exchanged through interpersonal and social interactions and relationships.

According to Strine et al. (2008), the support received from others allows divorced individuals to vent feelings, share problems, receive guidance, and obtain advice. Support is connected to reduced risk of mental and physical disorders as well as lower mortality. It increases the chances of coping with stress, making decisions, and maintaining new changes in behavior. It fosters personal competence, perceptions of control, sense of stability, and self-esteem. It also reduces the prevalence of suicide among those with depression. The researchers conclude that those with perceived social and emotional support from family and friends (and a significant other) can recover faster from the stress of divorce and depression than those who do not perceive such support.

Social resources for Hispanics. Russell and Taylor (2009) explained the positive

relationship between social support among older Hispanic adults and their ability to adjust post-divorce. The researchers drew data from a community-based research. The sample consisted of the same number of men and women within four ethnic groups in Miami-Dade County, including Cubans and other Hispanics. Results showed that perception of support received from family and friends affected how older Hispanic adults reacted to living alone and to the chances of suffering from depression. The study confirmed that accessibility of social resources is an important contributor to adjustment post-divorce for older Hispanic adults. The same way, their perception regarding the support they receive from others affect their ability to adjust.

Community groups. Vukalovich and Caltabiano (2008) proposed that participation in community group interventions improves adjustment to divorce by providing needed social and emotional support. The researchers explored the benefits of participating in a group intervention program among divorced individuals. Results indicated that group participants made significant gains and recognized short-term benefits in self-esteem and social support among other scales after attending the group program.

Similarly, Kimball, Wieling and Brimhall (2009) studied the positive effect of focus groups for divorced women. Applying phenomenological and ethnographical elements to their study, the researchers investigated the individual and group experience of seven participants. They conducted individual interviews and more than 10 group sessions. Kimball et al. (2009) found that divorced women experienced the group as a safe environment where they find the collaboration and necessary support to explore and process the divorce. The importance of these finding is twofold: one, it corroborates the

significance of social resources in the process of adjustment; two, it explains that support can be found in joining a group of individuals going through the same experience.

Attachment and Adjustment

In a similar manner, perceptions affect the attachment divorced individuals maintain to the former spouse (Muñoz-Eguileta, 2007). Muñoz-Eguileta proposed that attachment – recurrent thoughts of and/or preoccupation with ex-spouse – derives from internalized concepts and beliefs about how the world, oneself, others, and relationships should be. The researcher explained that a period of emotional turmoil is common during and after divorce, but thoughts become irrational when the turmoil lasts more than expected or when it becomes more intense or frequent. Irrational thoughts hinder recovery and adjustment by keeping the divorced individual emotionally attached.

Taking data from mediation centers and associations for separated individuals, the researcher recruited 88 participants (average age of 41, divorced for less than five years, and not remarried) to measure irrational beliefs such as High Self-Expectations. Attachment, considered a sign of maladaptive or unhealthy adjustment, was also measured. Results showed that high levels of irrationality generated high level of psychological distress.

Muñoz-Eguileta (2007) concluded that Attachment was higher when little time has passed after divorce and there has been little conflict in the relationship. The desire to spend time with the ex-spouse (regardless of the type or the quality of the relationship between them) was directly linked to the level of attachment. On the other hand, attachment decreased when a new relationship began. Muñoz-Eguileta explained that, even though a new partner does not substitute the attachment figure of the ex-spouse, it

nevertheless represents the beginning of a new emotional connection which is possible after reaching adjustment.

In agreement, Mandelbaum (2011) stated that adjustment and personal happiness after divorce are only possible when the divorced individual forms a new bond (or attachment) to another person. According to Mandelbaum, freedom and happiness can only be found when a bond has been formed with someone else who can provide love, safety, security, and support. Provided with these needs or realities, individuals are free to explore the world and feel independent.

Mandelbaum (2011) explained that divorced individuals must go through a process of detachment from the ex-spouse, reorganization of life goals, mourning the loss of the attachment figure, and re-stabilization of internal working models in order to adjust. To support this claim, Mandelbaum cited the movie *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the movie, the protagonist, Liz, mourns the loss of her marriage, forgives herself, and overcomes the pain of her divorce before beginning life as a separate individual. Liz finds balance and security after she falls in love again. According to the author, it is the bond or attachment to another person that promotes self-acceptance, self-love, and self-exploration within the divorced person. Mandelbaum concluded that “relationship dissolution in the name of personal freedom may in the end, bring personal anxiety, and a life void of attachment...connection, not independence, may yield happiness” (p. 131).

Apparently, adjustment can be reached by those with reduced attachment to the former spouse. Although all individuals require connection with or attachment to others, the level of attachment to the former spouse after divorce negatively affects the level of adjustment post- divorce. It also appears that attachment to the ex-spouse decreases with

the development of a new bond or attachment to another person or romantic liaison. In addition, attachment is influenced by perceptions (Wang & Amato, 2000).

Perceptions and Adjustment

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) proposed that coping responses to a stressful event or experience involve powerful emotions. Even though negative emotions are emphasized, positive emotions generally accompany the stress process depending on the appraisal made. Response is negative and intense when the divorced perceives that important goals have been harmed or lost during the experience. On the other hand, positive emotions (and adjustment) predominate when the experience is perceived and resolved in a positive manner.

According to Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), positive emotions result from the integration of the stressful event to the divorcee's perceptions about the world, the situation, and the self. A positive appraisal of divorce, therefore, involves interpreting the experience of divorce in terms of its long-term benefits, such as increased individual autonomy and control, closer relationships with family and friends, reorganization of life goals, and greater appreciation for life. These benefits are considered positive outcomes of divorce and are conducive to personal growth.

It is then important to evaluate the specific context in which the stressful event takes place because the context affects the effectiveness of the coping tools used by the individual under stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The present study was conducted in the context where divorce took place for every participant. This allowed a better understanding of how the participants perceived their divorce experience, why they made certain decisions, and why they adopted certain behaviors after their divorce.

A longitudinal study measuring the influence of perceptions on divorce adjustment was conducted by Sweeper and Halford (2006). The researchers measured three psychological challenges for divorcees: the loss of an intimate partner, loneliness, and coordination of parenting tasks. Most of the 169 Australian participants recruited were women, over 21 years of age, with a graduate education, and divorced or separated within the previous 12 months. Most had initiated the separation.

The study was limited by a sample of educated, privileged adults who were recruited through public records or the media (subjects may have tried to feel better by participating). Nevertheless, Sweeper and Halford (2006) concluded that perceptions are strong determinants of divorce adjustment. Adjustment thus depends on the individual's perceptions of divorce in general and perceptions of loss in particular (Baum, 2003; Bernstein, 2007).

Accepting losses. Baum (2003) affirmed that overcoming perceptions of loss is crucial to adjustment post-divorce. According to Baum, men and women overcome losses differently. Women start the mourning of losses before men do because they normally experience the stress of the marital dissolution before men and this helps women adjust to the stress of divorce earlier. Men tend to deny feelings of loss and distance themselves from feelings of pain, sadness, and sorrow related to the divorce. Men escape and get distant through drugs, alcohol, workaholism, and somatization. Women may score higher on depression levels than men, but adjust earlier than men. Women also socialize more. This connection with their social environments provides women with the aids needed to mourn the losses and adjust to their new circumstances. All along, the interpretations made regarding the losses inherited in the divorce make the difference.

Moreover, Bernstein (2007) indicated that some individuals are able to adjust after divorce depending on their preconceived ideas about the loss of the ex-spouse and the plans made. Bernstein sustained that adjustment is possible when the divorced individual is able to accept the losses incurred, mourn the attachments made with the ex-spouse, and devise new plans. Adjustment is also possible when divorced individuals recognize that the end of the original, intact family does not mean the end of family life in general.

According to Bernstein (2007), adjusted individuals recognize divorce as a temporary and transitory stage in life that involves change. Adjustment is thus gradually reached when the individual is capable of overcoming losses, developing relationships with low to no attachment to the ex-spouse, making sense of the experience, and ascribing new meaning to the divorce experience based on the individual's perceptions.

Bernstein (2007) also emphasized that the ability to forgive oneself and others promotes divorce adjustment and feelings of self-worth. Rohde-Brown and Rudestam (2011) corroborated that forgiveness is conducive to psychological growth and reduction of distress, depression and anger. Thus, in order for divorced individuals to adjust, they must let go of old resentments, be able to forgive, and be aware of their emotional response to the divorce experience. Positive perceptions are then crucial to adjustment.

Summarizing, the literature has so far revealed that adjustment to the stressful experience of divorce is gradual, but achievable. The ability to adjust depends on: accessibility of personal resources, reduced attachment to the former spouse, and perceptions about the experience of divorce. The literature has also shown that Hispanics are able to overcome stressful situations because they develop resilience.

Cultural challenges. Certain cultural values, attitudes, and practices traditionally held by Hispanics can either help or hinder their recovery from stress. These include: machismo, familism, and religion. Each of these cultural practices must be examined.

Machism. Machismo is defined as a collection of personality traits that relate to masculinity which are shaped by specific gender roles and exhibited by the manly need to be tough or the only decision maker in the family (Pardo, Weisfeld, Hill, & Slatcher, 2012). Garzon and Tan (1992) observed that Hispanics' machist attitudes can conduce to negative behaviors. For instance, the machist need to be the sole economic provider in the family is negatively impacted when the husband is unemployed. If the man is unable to provide for the family, he may develop a passive aggressive behavior, may suffer from hallucinations, and even abuse alcohol. Based on Garzon and Tan's observations, being machist may inhibit the ability of older Hispanic males to adjust because divorce deprives them of a family to provide for and a home where to make decisions.

Garzon and Tan (1992) also found that machismo inhibited Hispanic males from being sincere and from openly sharing their feelings during therapeutic interventions. Hispanic men may remain silent and even attempt to divert feelings when approached or challenged during therapy. They may also avoid showing signs of weakness by crying in front of the counselor. Thus, the ability to adjust may be hindered by their inability to openly share feelings, perceptions, and thoughts during counseling.

More comprehensive and contemporary findings emerge from the study conducted by Pardo et al. (2012). The researchers alleged that there are positive and negative dimensions to machismo. Negative machismo – characterized by increased dominance, control, and lack of emotional availability – indicates “an emotional

expression of men caught up between social and cultural expectations that conflict in regards to what is appropriate masculine behavior” (p. 13).

Negative machismo is stronger among those with low acculturation, probably because their beliefs and values about their roles are more congruent with what is culturally and socially accepted in their countries of origin (Pardo et al., 2012). The positive dimension of machismo, on the other hand, relates to the notion of gentleman (*caballerismo*), chivalry, and the ability to be nurturing. Positive machismo is associated with higher levels of acculturation and happier marriages. Based on these observations, not all Hispanic males will be affected by their machist views or practices.

Oropesa and Landale (2004) argued that the Hispanic culture has changed its views regarding marriage as a “rigid, hierarchically organized institutional arrangement characterized by extreme gender segregation” (p. 914) in which husbands dominate and wives obey. According to Oropesa and Landale, Hispanic couples now develop more companionate and modern relationships in which they trust and help one another while satisfying emotional and sexual needs. If this is truly the case, then the ability of older Hispanic men and women to adjust may depend on whether their marriages endured a negative or positive machist attitude.

Familism. Familism, another central characteristic of the Hispanic culture, emphasizes the creation and maintenance of cooperative and close family relationships and makes Hispanics value marriage more so than other population groups, including non-Hispanic Whites (Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Landale et al., 2006). The family has been considered “the single most important institution among Hispanics” (Christenson et al., 2006, p. 476) and this emphasis on the supportive role of the family and the

community is transmitted to younger generations of Hispanics (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008; Rodriguez, Mira, Paez, & Myers, 2007).

Coleman, Ganong, and Rothrauff (2006) explained that the concept of the family (*la familia*) means that the needs of the family are placed above individual wants and needs. Familism also relates to loyalty, solidarity, cohesion, and reciprocity with nuclear and extended family members as well as viewing the family as an important source of emotional support (Cabassa et al., 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2006). Therefore, being married and having a family are important to older Hispanic adults.

Arias (2001) used a classic assimilation model to test two hypotheses; one was the patterns of marriage among Cuban immigrants and Anglo-Americans. The other hypothesis related to the incidence of interethnic marriage in the U.S. Arias compared marriage patterns and socioeconomic forces affecting the Hispanic population. Results of the study showed that Cubans living in Dade County, attempted to maintain a social and cultural ethnic community while assimilating into the larger Anglo community by marrying other Cubans, thus retaining traditional cultural norms regarding the family unit. In other words, as Hispanic immigrants acculturate and assimilate Anglo patterns, they continue to derive a great deal of self-worth and self-fulfillment from their spouses, their families, and their communities.

More importantly, Heard (2007) asserted that minorities rely on their relatives and their communities for support and maintain a strong family involvement when compared to other population groups. This is partially the reason why Hispanic families share the same households and concentrate in the same regional areas (another reason is economic necessity). As evidence, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that more than 26% of

Hispanic family households consisted of five or more people in comparison to only 10.8% of non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003). Hispanics enjoy living together or close by their relatives and friends.

Others have identified Hispanics' strong familistic tendency through their performance of daily tasks (Britigan et al., 2009). When seeking health information, for instance, Hispanics show their family-oriented practices and specific gender roles as the mothers make most decisions on family health care (Britigan et al., 2009). It has also been noted that Hispanic fathers are more involved with their children than those from other ethnic groups (Schwartz & Finely, 2005).

Stated briefly, divorced Hispanics maintain a strong sense of obligation toward family and friends. They represent a significant source of fulfillment and satisfaction as well as a powerful resource and motivator to overcome adversity and hardship (Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Parra-Cardona et al., 2008). Familism thus becomes the social resource needed for older Hispanic adults to adjust to divorce. As a resource, familism involves relying on family, friends, and the community for support (Rodriguez et al., 2007). Another powerful resource is religion (Arango-Lasparilla et al., 2009).

Religion and Adjustment

Religion (or spirituality) is a powerful determinant of adjustment for most divorced individuals (Arango-Lasparilla et al., 2009; Krumrei et al., 2009). Religious commitment and affiliation can benefit the divorcees' health and well-being by helping them find the strength to endure (Lehrer, 2004) as well as purpose and meaning in challenging circumstances (Ellison, Wolfinger, & Ramos-Wada, 2012). Being religiously committed and affiliated can influence the way in which people appraise and respond to

the stress of divorce (Ellison et al., 2012; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Religious struggle and/or coping. Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) used a correlational method and a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship that existed between religious coping and psychological adjustment levels to stress. Most participants in the study were Protestants and Catholics who completed self-reports. Although limited by the participants' own experiences and their ability to remember past events, results of the study showed that religious coping was related to both positive outcomes (e.g., happiness, personal growth, and emotional well-being) and negative outcomes (e.g., guilt, anxiety, depression, anger, and suicide) depending on how the stressful event was appraised.

Likewise, Krumrei et al. (2009) claimed that the effects of religion could be either positive or negative depending on how the divorce experience was perceived. Using a qualitative study and based on previous research, Krumrei et al. explored how spiritual responses affected psychological adjustment. The study involved 100 recently divorced adults from a mid-west city, ranging from 19 to 75 years of age. Most of the participants had initiated the divorce. Participants were: 87% Caucasian, 5% Hispanics, and 8% Other who were recruited through public records and announcements at parenting seminars. Participants completed a Sacred Loss and Desecration Scale, the Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE), and the Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D).

Results of the study showed that, even though some divorced individuals considered their divorce a sacred loss or desecration (the loss of something that comes from God) and experienced spiritual struggles (believing that God was punishing them), the majority (88 percent) engaged in "adaptive spiritual coping" (Krumrei et al., 2009, p.

373). Adaptive religious or spiritual coping contributed to better adjustment after divorce and involved engaging in worshiping rituals, prayers, nature walks, and joining a religious group or congregation.

Conclusions regarding the negative consequences of spiritual struggle were corroborated in a similar study conducted by the same researchers some years later and involving 100 participants, most of which were 65 or older (Krumrei et al., 2011a). According to these studies and their results, religion can provoke positive reactions leading to posttraumatic growth and psychological adjustment to divorce depending on the connection individuals make between their divorce and their religious beliefs; a matter of perception, again.

Still another study addressing the role of religion on divorce adjustment was conducted by Krumrei et al. (2011b). The study involved 98 divorced families who responded to surveys. Most of them (91%) identified spirituality or religion as an important coping tool during divorce. Researchers found that most divorcees engaged simultaneously in both, negative religious coping (a source of distress and depressive symptoms) and positive religious coping (a resource conducive to posttraumatic growth). Krumrei et al. (2011b) concluded that, more than the level of religiosity, it was the way in which religion influenced the individual's perception of the stressful situation or event.

Although these studies were limited to specific races and socioeconomic status of the participant sample, mostly composed of educated adults from privileged segments of the population and disregarded minorities, they explained that spiritual struggles (e.g., feeling abandoned, betrayed, or punished by God, questioning God's power, or experiencing moral guilt) can lead to emotional distress and consequently reduced

adjustment post-divorce.

On the other hand, religiosity can be conducive to personal growth when religion or spirituality brings about peace, motivation, and the ability to manage a difficult experience. Believing in God or a divine being can bring support, comfort, and strength while helping overcome feelings of anger, hurt, and fear regarding divorce (Krumrei et al., 2011a). Religion is therefore important to the divorce experience as many divorced individuals engage in spiritual appraisals and either negative or positive coping. Religious beliefs must then be considered as contributors to adjustment.

Religion and Hispanics. Hispanics' religious commitment and involvement have been recognized by many (Arango-Lasparilla et al., 2009; Hernandez et al., 2007). Most Hispanics (66%) identify themselves as Catholics (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). More than 60% of them report attending church at least once a month and more than 80% recognize religion as one of the most important things in their lives (Hernandez, et al., 2007).

Garzon and Tan (1992) studied Hispanics' religious orientations and practices. The authors identified Hispanics' religious orientations as Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism. They explained that Catholics believe in saints and martyrs who endured suffering for good causes (as Jesus did in the cross). Religious rituals, like Lent, also emphasize and even revere grief and suffering. Suffering for a cause like divorce could be perceived by Hispanics as a form of sacrifice or martyrism. Arango-Lasprilla et al. (2009) agreed that Hispanics perceive suffering as God's will, and that coping with difficult or stressful life experiences shows worthiness.

Similarly, Webb (2008) agreed on the role of religious coping in the process of adjustment to divorce among Hispanics. Webb conducted a longitudinal study among

divorcing mothers from different cultural groups, including Hispanic women. The researcher used a stress and coping theoretical framework. Webb found that negative religious coping were connected to negative divorce appraisal and higher levels of depression while positive religious coping related to increased religiosity and adjustment. Although participants were only women recruited within 120 days after filing for divorce and recently separated, Hispanic women showed significant lower levels of depression than other cultural groups. This indicates a positive religious coping, positive divorce appraisal, and better divorce adjustment among Hispanics. In other words, the prominent role of religion in Hispanics' lives cannot be disregarded because it contributes to their adjustment post-divorce.

Some experts claim that divorced Hispanics experience limited support (and even rejection) from their church and this impacts their adjustment negatively (Maldonado, 2000; Qualls, 2008). Other scholars affirm that church leaders are changing their views regarding divorce, acknowledging the importance of providing embrace, and developing support programs and groups to foster divorcees' adjustment (Jenkins, 2010; Qualls, 2008). Qualls expands on the benefits of joining a religious support group.

Religious support groups. Qualls (2008) found that a church's support group for divorcees at a Baptist Church in Atlanta helped participants experience *embrace* instead of exclusion or rejection. The purpose of the group was to increase divorcees' understanding of and adjustment to their divorce experience in order to bring balance and healing. This is a helpful study that supports the benefits of embracing relationships between divorcees and their religious faiths in their search for adjustment post-divorce.

Likewise, McCage (2003) explored the effects of completing a divorce-recovery

program called *DivorceCare* in comparison to participating in Sunday school classes for divorcees. The 13-week program was based on the Bible and utilized by Protestant churches in Fort Worth, Texas. The Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale were implemented among 34 participants who attended *DivorceCare* and 31 who attended Sunday school.

Results of the study confirmed the positive effects of religion in adjustment to divorce, especially when divorced individuals participate in a religious support group. Yarnoz, Plazaola, and Etxeberria (2008) also studied a divorce recovery group lasting eight months. At the end of this period, participants reported feeling better, less lonely, and more secure. Their affect was more positive too.

In addition, Jenkins (2010) confirmed that exploring the experience of divorce in groups has therapeutic value with a potential for unity through group identity and ritual. Through an ethnographic study including Roman Catholic case studies, Jenkins studied how individuals experienced divorce in their own religious communities. Jenkins found that divorce support groups were offered in most religious traditions. For example, Jenkins found a Catholic support group called Catholic Divorce Ministries (CDM) which had been founded in the 1970s. The CDM group offered retreats, conferences, and support groups emphasizing religious self-transformation, self-work and betterment for the divorcee to recover from “a precarious yet valuable emotional state” (p. 284).

Jenkins (2010) drew conclusions from a purposeful sample of religiously active individuals after conducting 60 interviews and completing more than 60 hours of participant observations in religious divorce support groups, conferences, and workshops for divorcees. Common themes discussed in the group included: the importance of

expressing feelings, reestablishing emotional balance, providing the tools to help divorcees understand their emotions, explanation of the grief stages, sharing feelings with others struggling with similar emotions, and taking steps toward self-realization or betterment. Results showed that, even though Catholic respondents reported feeling lonely, ashamed, and unsure, Mass services provided the opportunity for connection with the community. However, support groups showed the most positive results for Catholic divorcees.

This portion of the literature showed that divorced Hispanics take religious practices and beliefs seriously and deeply when in pain. Hispanic divorcees turn to their community churches in times of hardship and grief. Religious practices and affiliations help divorced Hispanics identify themselves individually and collectively. Participating in religious services and activities serve as coping tools when they are in need of healing emotional and mental pain; when they are trying to make sense of stressful experiences, and when they are trying to find healing and comfort.

While seeking ways to relieve emotional pain and make endings meaningful, divorced Hispanics turn to their religious entities and join religious support groups. Participation in these support groups can help develop the coping strategies needed for adjustment. The ability to process the end of their marriages in a supportive, religious environment, can improve mental and emotional health. It can also result in healing and psychological growth by bringing about religious meaning and purpose to their divorce experience.

This literature review has confirmed that adjustment to divorce is challenging, but achievable for older Hispanic adults. According to the literature, contributors to

adjustment are: the ability to adjust to the stress of divorce, the accessibility of social resources, and the perception of the divorce experience. The present research study provided needed answers to fill in remaining gaps in the literature. The study involved interviews and observations which allowed a deeper and more extensive assessment of their experience of divorce (Carroll et al., 2007).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. How do Hispanics who divorce in late-life perceive the process of divorce?
2. How do Hispanics understand and make meaning of their divorce?
3. What are the perceptions of Hispanics who participate in a religious divorce support group?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter addresses the reasons and benefits of using a case study research method to explore how older Hispanic adults' perceptions of divorce and the coping skills which contribute to their adjustment. The selection of participants and the instrument chosen to elicit data are explained. A section is then dedicated to the procedures on how the study was conducted and how the data were collected and analyzed. Lastly, the issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and potential bias are discussed before limitations of the study are acknowledged.

Design. Case study is used as a standard and suitable qualitative research method in the fields of psychology and education because it can contribute to knowledge regarding individuals and related phenomenon (Grünbaum, 2007; Yin, 2003). Case study benefits researchers by allowing them a close look at real-life situations while they receive feedback from participants (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This increases researchers' understanding of the phenomenon being studied and helps develop their research skills (Black, Schwartz, Caruso, & Hannum, 2008).

According to Yin (2003), case studies are *empirical inquiries* that allow for an intensive examination of each individual unit or case. It is the preferred approach when: (a) the researcher wants to investigate *how* something happened or why it happened; (b) the researcher is unable to manipulate events, contexts, or behaviors; (c) the emphasis is on a current phenomenon within a real-life setting; and (d) the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear. The present study met these requirements; therefore, case study was the appropriate research method to accomplish its purposes.

Participants

A purposeful population sampling was selected (Creswell, 2008). Purposeful sampling can represent the setting, the individuals, and the activities taking place and can also help establish comparisons and differences between them (Maxwell, 2004).

Participants were first-generation Hispanics of average financial stability and level of education (Table 1). They were both male and female living in Miami-Dade County; individuals who: (a) were older than 55, (b) had experienced divorce after being married for at least 15 years, and (c) had been divorced for a minimum of five years – to allow a better outlook of how adjustment had been reached. All of the participants in this study practiced the Catholic religion and recognized as crucial in their recovery process.

Table 1

Demographics

Interviewee	Sex/Age	Country of origin	Years married	Years divorced	Marital status at time of immigration
I1	M, 65	P.R.	21	15	Married
I2	F, 56	Cuba	30	6	Married
I3	F, 57	Cuba	15	23	Single
I4	M, 76	Cuba	33	30	Married
I5	F, 57	Cuba	25	10	Single
I6	F, 59	Cuba	26	9	Married
I7	M, 76	Cuba	29	15	Single
I8	F, 67	Cuba	37	11	Single
I9	F, 63	Cuba	34	8	Single
I10	F, 62	Cuba	29	12	Single
I11	M, 70	Cuba	17	5	Married
I12	F, 69	Cuba	39	5	Single

The participants were recruited from a religious divorce support group of the Agape program in a local Catholic church. The Agape group offered weekly meetings, frequent religious retreats, and occasional workshops emphasizing self-work and self-betterment for participants to recover from their distressing emotional state.

Through the groups, participants were able to discuss and learn about important issues. These included: causes of their marital deterioration, the benefits of expressing emotions and the different stages of grief and loss. They also developed skills to re-establish emotional balance. They were also provided with the tools to help them understand emotions and behaviors.

The researcher was able to identify only six participants during the first visit to the group. Thus, the researcher asked the identified participants to recommend other Hispanics meeting the study's criteria and who have previously participated in the support group; thus becoming a snowball sampling. Using a snowball sampling allowed the researcher to recruit a large number of participants for the study (Creswell, 2008). It also helped maintain homogeneity in the study's design (Yin, 2003).

Out of the 15 prospect participants identified, the researcher selected the first 12 individuals who met the criteria and were willing and able to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria were: Hispanics older than 55 years of age who were married for a minimum of 15 years and had been divorced for a minimum of five years. They were current or past members of the Agape support group.

Hispanics who did not meet the above criteria were excluded from participating in the study. This means that, Hispanics who had never belonged to the Agape support group, or were younger than 55, or were married for less than 15 years or had been

divorced for less than five years at the time of the study, were not chosen to participate. The final 12 participants in the research study were enough to allow the data gathered to be deep, extensive, and varied (Morrow, 2007).

Instruments

The researcher was granted permission to use a protocol to guide individual interviews (Appendix A). The protocol was developed by a student researcher and used in a similar multiple case study dissertation exploring divorce adjustment (Leighman, 2009). The population that was used involved seven middle-aged White women (ages 40 to 65) from Texas who divorced after twenty or more years of marriage and had been divorced for more than five years at the time of the study. The protocol helped answer questions about these women's expectations from marriage, how the marriage deteriorated, feelings experienced, and losses incurred (Leighman, 2009).

The same way, the protocol helped generate answers to the research questions proposed in the present study. The protocol increased insight on how Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life understand and perceive the process of divorce. It also identified the challenges faced by older Hispanic adults and the contributors to their adjustment years after their divorce.

The researcher also used an observational guide or checklist to guide observations during support groups (Appendix B). The list included: description of the physical setting, topic of group discussion and particular events or activities (i.e., what occurred in the group). The list also included: personal reactions from participants, interaction of the research subjects with other group members, and researcher's personal thoughts, insights, and themes identified.

Leighman (2009) considered the human instrument the primary instrument to collect data. In the present study, both the protocol and the observational guide served to collect data. However, according to Hood (2006), Leighman (2009), and Tuckett (2005), the researcher can be considered another tool for collecting data. As the human instrument in this study, the researcher collected and clarified disclosures, interacted with participants, guided discussions and interviews, then summarized disclosures and overall findings (Hood, 2006; Leighman, 2009). These three instruments helped gather data during this research study.

Procedures

The researcher started by seeking approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) had already been completed. The researcher followed established IRB stipulations before starting the research. The researcher completed IRB documents and submitted a description of the proposed research study including: the purpose of the study, the data-collection process, and evidence that the researcher would take adequate measures to protect participants (Creswell, 2008). The researcher also sent IRB a copy of the Informed Consent form to be signed by participants before individual interviews were conducted. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher sent documents to the dissertation committee Chair for review and started the research study with the Chair's permission.

The researcher contacted the coordinator of a religious support group called Agape, explained the purpose of the study, and scheduled a visit to the site. The site was a room in a Catholic church where divorced Hispanics met once a week. The researcher conducted an informal meeting during the first visit to explain the benefits of the study to

the participants, arrangements made to maintain confidentiality of data, and how the results were going to be used and reported (Creswell, 2008). The researcher identified potential participants for the study both current and past members of the group.

The researcher approached prospect participants meeting the inclusion criteria to explain the Informed Consent form and answer questions and concerns. The consent form explained in writing the purpose of the study, the approximate time the interview would take, their voluntary participation, plans for using the study's results, and possible risks associated with the study. The researcher allowed a week to undecided potential subjects to make a decision and return the signed form if they decided to participate. The researcher explained that the first 12 individuals returning the signed consent will be selected to participate in the study. The process was repeated until the sample size was achieved.

The researcher arranged to meet with each of the 12 participants individually to conduct face-to-face interviews. The participants were seen at either their homes or a private location such as their offices; a place without interruptions or distractions (Creswell, 2008). The researcher used the protocol selected to guide the interviews. Questions included how they described their experiences during their divorce, how their appraisals or perceptions influenced their decisions and behaviors, whether recovery and adjustment were reached, and what skills they relied on to cope or recover. Open-ended questions and probes were used to elicit a detailed account of each participant's story and help explore the content as thoroughly and deeply as possible (Yin, 2004). According to Yin (2003), open-ended questions let participants express their ideas and experiences, allowing them to create their own options and responses without constraints.

During the interviews, the participants observed the researcher listening intently and recording their answers. Researcher's questions and participants' responses were recorded using a digital voice recorder in order to obtain an exact account of the interview (Creswell, 2008). The researcher completed each interview within one hour. When the interviews were completed, the researcher visited the support group to conduct observations of the research participants.

The observations were conducted at night and followed a regular meeting agenda with specific date, time and topic of discussion selected by the group coordinator. The site provided a structured and safe environment in which the group coordinator promoted the discussion of topics related to the phenomenon of divorce and where participants were able to share personal feelings and thoughts regarding their experience; an environment where they felt supported and understood (Creswell, 2008).

Observations lasted for the duration of the group, about two hours each visit. The researcher conducted a total of four observations over a period of two months in order to obtain the best knowledge and understanding of the individuals, their experiences, and the context (Creswell, 2008). The researcher completed the checklist during observations (Appendix C). These notes also contributed to data saturation as it provided the researcher with enough amount and depth of data during each observation (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010).

The observations performed during the four consecutive meetings confirmed the benefits of participating in the Agape support groups. Within a small room in a Catholic church in Miami-Dade, participants sat either in a circle or around a rectangular table depending on their numbers. They started the meetings with an opening prayer to the

Holy Spirit to come and bring peace. Then, they discussed the topic of the day (e.g., the Stages of Loss, preparing for a new relationship, or the Transactional Analysis).

The groups lasted for about two hours on Tuesday nights. Some participants agreed while others disagreed and argued, but the comfort they derived from each other and the genuine friendship they shared were all evident. Under a bright fluorescent light and close to the main door, a portray of Jesus Christ read: “Jesus I trust in You.”

Data collection. Field notes were handwritten by the researcher during the fieldwork after each interview and observation (Appendix D). Details about the setting, each person being interviewed or observed, the date, time, and duration of the meeting were all noted in the field journal (Creswell, 2008). Nonverbal communication was also included, such as hand gestures, posture, and facial expressions to allow a better connection between participants’ feelings, attitudes, and verbalizations made (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Emotions expressed, including sadness and anger, were also noted in the field journal using symbols in order to reduce time spent in writing and to avoid distractions to either researcher or participant (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Field notes taken during group observations also included detailed explanations and descriptions of: the topics of discussion, what occurred in the group, the interaction between participants, and agreements or disagreements among group members. The number of participants who agreed, disagreed, or did not voice any opinion was noted by the researcher and traced by participants’ verbalizations or nodding of their heads (Creswell, 2008). This allowed a better understanding of group dynamics and a better identification of themes and categories that emerged from the data collected (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

In the field journal, the researcher also reflected on personal thoughts, interpretations made and common themes; all of which added to the accuracy of the findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Tuckett, 2005). The researcher also noted changes undergone by participants during the study (e.g., whether they became more open and comfortable throughout the study; Creswell, 2008). To an extent, these notes reflected some data analysis as they included facts and interpretations made (Diaz-Andrade, 2009).

The researcher then arranged a meeting with all research participants to share findings and transcripts. A draft report was reviewed by the participants to corroborate information gathered and interpretations made by the researcher. Further explanations were sought in case of disagreement or discrepancy by the researcher asking participants to provide information they might have disregarded or forgotten (Yin, 2003). After data were collected from interviews and observations, data were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis. The researcher analyzed the data as outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001) and Yin (2003). The researcher started by reading transcriptions multiple times to identify main ideas. Meaningful text was then analyzed and coded using categorical coding with enumeration. This coding system is suited for the analysis of verbal data (e.g., interviews) and better illustrates responses that are naturally categorical (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). This allowed for the recognition of common patterns or categories which were then supported by quotes from the text. After each transcript was treated this way, the researcher developed a matrix or visual depiction of the data. Narratives were composed later.

During narratives, the researcher wrote open-ended answers in response to the questions in the protocol (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003). The answers (about two or three

paragraphs each) were considered part of the study database and resembled comprehensive, detailed examinations of each case (Creswell, 2008). The researcher did not edit the narratives, but made them available for others who wanted to review them and corroborate conclusions made (Yin, 2003).

Findings from the Wang and Amato's (2000) study guided the researcher throughout the analysis of the data. Each narrative was checked for contributing experiences, practices, or skills involved in the divorce adjustment process as suggested by Wang and Amato. These included: (a) ability to overcome or adapt to stressors; (b) availability of social resources; (c) level of attachment to the former spouse; and (d) definitions or perceptions attached to the divorce experience. The researcher also identified challenges experienced by older Hispanic adults (e.g., religious practices). Together, they became a framework to compare and contrast the divorce experiences lived by the 12 Hispanic participants in the study.

Data were validated through the use of three different types of data collection or triangulation (Creswell, 2008). These included: interviews made face-to-face with each participant, four observations of the religious support group, and a field journal in which the researcher's insights and feelings were noted. Trustworthiness of the data was also established by having participants verify themes identified by the researcher. In addition, the researcher asked the facilitator of the group to review questions from the protocol before interviews were conducted and conclusions were made.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was established by triangulation of the data and by member checking. Triangulation involved corroborating findings from different types of data, including individual interviews, group observations, and the field journal

(Creswell, 2008). Triangulation showed that the topic under study had been explored and viewed from different perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This enhanced the study's credibility as it helped the researcher develop a report that was credible and accurate (Creswell, 2008; Glesne, 2011).

Member checking helped establish trustworthiness as the researcher shared transcripts and drafts of the findings with the participants during a meeting arranged by the researcher at the group coordinator's home (Creswell, 2008). Each participant was provided with a copy of the results of the study. Member checking helped determine that the findings were accurate as the participants were asked their opinion regarding the accuracy of the findings and the interpretations made (Creswell, 2008). Participants were encouraged to provide their impressions and understandings on whether the interpretations had been fairly and accurately made by the researcher (Berrios & Luca, 2006). They were also encouraged to contribute additional or new perspectives on the issue of adjustment to divorce thus increasing the study's trustworthiness (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Ethical considerations. Ethical risks and issues are greater in qualitative research than other research methods because of the close involvement of – and shared responsibilities between – the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2008). To reduce the impact of ethical issues, the researcher followed the guidelines set forth by the IRB to protect human subjects during research studies. The researcher also provided each participant with an Informed Consent form before they were interviewed. This informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any given moment if it was in their best interest, explained what they could expect, and helped them understand the

risks and benefits associated with the study.

Although the researcher could not ensure confidentiality for information shared by the subjects in the support group session (during the observations), the researcher minimized this risk by avoiding the use of names in any research document. The researcher limited the reporting of findings to quotes, descriptions, and themes that were not attributed to individual participants (Morrow, 2007). Participants were assured that no relationship will be made between them and the findings reported (Creswell, 2008).

In addition, transcription of the data collected was done in a personal desktop computer and saved in a Microsoft Word document. The transcription was saved and encrypted with a password. The researcher/transcriber was the only one with knowledge of the encrypted password and access to the transcripts in order to minimize the risk of confidentiality.

The researcher was attentive to any signs of discomfort that emerged while participants disclosed painful emotions such as grief or shame (East et al., 2010). When this happened, the researcher paused and provided support as needed. The researcher continued later when participants felt better. If participants needed further help, the researcher suggested the name of a professional for participants to see, but they were reminded that they had to pay for the services themselves.

The benefits of sharing experiences were mentioned, as suggested by East et al. (2010). According to the scholars, having participants tell and reflect on their personal stories can foster emotional insight and healing. Personal resilience can also be developed as they are able to view their experiences from a different perspective. They are also able to grow by making sense of their situation. East et al. (2010) affirmed that sharing and

disclosing of information can also bring about hardiness.

Hardiness is the ability to view negative experiences as meaningful elements of a person's journey in life. Telling their stories can also become the basis of strong relationships and support networks among the storytellers, the listeners, and the audience. In addition, adopting an active role during the study turned participants into co-researchers which added to their sense of power, resilience, and healing (Berrios & Lucca, 2006).

Potential researcher bias. Researcher's own reasons for wanting to conduct a study on a specific phenomenon as well as the experiences and perspectives in which these were grounded were all a source of bias (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003). The researcher, a 39-year-old Cuban female at the time of her divorce, was able to adjust to the experience fairly well, even though she was married for 15 years. The researcher did not feel attached to the ex-spouse and had the social resources needed to adjust throughout the experience.

The researcher counted with family support and eventually developed a new romantic relationship. The researcher also held a positive outlook toward divorce while still married and considered divorce an option to a problematic relationship. The researcher also held strong religious beliefs and joined the Agape support group two years after divorce; all of which served as effective resources and coping skills throughout her experience. The researcher's experience could be considered a source of potential bias as the researcher could have expected participants to adjust the same way she did.

Besides, the researcher held own preconceived ideas regarding the research

participants, the phenomenon under study, and the context in which it takes place; all derived from theory and the literature reviewed (Yin, 2004). For instance, the researcher assumed that all divorced Hispanics who participate in a religious support group are able to adjust to divorce because they have engaged in “adaptive spiritual coping” (Kumrei et al., 2009, p. 11). Other issues to consider are researcher’s empathy, respect, and cultural sensitivity during the relationship with participants (Morrow, 2007).

To manage bias, the researcher kept a personal journal. The journal included researcher’s thoughts regarding how the study affected the researcher, concerns about the impact of the study on the participants, and possible biases and ethical issues that arose at different stages of the study (Glesne, 2011). Furthermore, the researcher attempted to understand how she influenced what the interviewee said, and how to productively (and ethically) use this influence to have participants answer research questions (Morrow, 2007).

The researcher also shared findings with the support group coordinator. The coordinator had guided these groups for more than 13 years and was able to recognize discrepancies between what was real and what was the result of researcher’s bias. Lastly, the researcher’s more than ten years of experience providing counseling services within the Hispanic community could attest to the respect, sensibility, and empathy held toward this population group.

Limitations

According to Creswell (2008), both interviews and observations involve limitations and constraints. Self-reports during interviews only reflect the interviewees’ version or perspective of the divorce experience, not that of the former spouse.

Participants' stories may be false and answers may not be clear either during interviews. Therefore, gathered data from interviews may be misleading or deceptive.

On the other hand, observations are limited to specific sites and settings. In this case, the study took place in one Catholic Church in Miami-Dade; just in one community or region in the state and the country. Results may therefore not apply to other sites, settings, or regions. It may also be difficult to develop rapport during group observations, especially if the participants are not used to formal research (Creswell, 2008). Equipment issues could become a problem too.

A small sample size is another limitation of the present study as the patterns identified and the conclusions reached may not be transferable to the remaining divorced Hispanic population (Creswell, 2008; Leighman, 2009). There was also a potential for the research study to be totally controlled by the researcher which can hinder its trustworthiness (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Besides, conducting a case study means that the findings can only provide one possible interpretation instead of the only one interpretation (Yin, 2004).

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The population sampling consisted of eight women and four men representing older Hispanic adults in Miami-Dade County. They were older than 55, had experienced divorce after being married 15 or more years, and had been divorced for at least five years. They were (or had been) members of the Agape support groups. This sampling allowed for comparisons to be established between participants and for the researcher to identify the most common themes amongst them (Appendix E).

The data collected and analyzed from transcribed interviews, observations made, and field notes produced different themes. The data was analyzed through categorical coding with enumeration which allowed different categories or themes to emerge. Analysis of the data involved verifying the themes several times. This was done by the researcher going back twice to ensure that the categories were correct.

Emergent themes were also verified during the meeting with participants. The meeting was arranged by the researcher after the first draft report was prepared. During the meeting, the most common emerging themes were discussed and corroborated to ensure accuracy. After coding and verification, emergent themes were classified as either challenges to adjustment or contributors to adjustment.

The first session of this chapter is dedicated to the challenges faced by the participants during their divorce. Challenges were generally identified during the first three years after the divorce and included: losses incurred, a deteriorated psychological status, and religious struggle. The following section is dedicated to those resources or skills which contributed to participants' adjustment to divorce. These were developed or

acquired about the third year after divorce and included: psychological help, high level of resilience, and positive perceptions of divorce.

Challenges to Adjustment

The 12 Hispanic participants in this study were first generation immigrants. As such, they were no strangers to facing challenges. These challenges were acknowledged during interviews and observations.

One of the male participants was Puerto Rican. The remaining three males and eight females were Cubans. They have all lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years.

Although participants immigrated to the U.S. at different ages, they nevertheless suffered the effects of immigration by leaving behind family members, friends from childhood, and familiar communities. They also struggled with the English language and the American culture.

Those who came as adults dealt with reduced employment opportunities. The financial necessities, acculturation to western attitudes, and limited opportunities challenged traditional family structures for those who came already married. Although none of the participants recognized marital instability due to immigration and acculturation issues, these facts cannot be disregarded as divorce added to their list of challenges.

Significant losses. Research participants were able to identify the challenges faced during their divorce. These challenges included numerous losses such as the loss of income, the loss of the family unit, and loss of security and stability (Table 2). Losses were significant and acknowledged by all research participants. They were frequently acknowledged during the first three years of the divorce process.

Table 2

Significant Losses

Type of loss	Interviewee	<i>n</i>
Loss of significant income	I1, I2, I4, I5, I6, I8, I9, I10, I11	9
Loss of the family unit	I1, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, I11, I12	9
Loss of friendships	I1, I3, I4, I7, I9, I11	6
Loss of dreams and expectations	I1, I2, I3, I5, I6, I8, I10, I11, I12	9
Loss of stability and security	I1, I2, I3, I8, I10, I11, I12	7
Loss compared to death	I2, I3, I5, I6	4

Note. *n* = number of participants

Participants remembered all they have lost with the divorce. These losses were remembered during individual interviews. They also became a frequent topic of conversations during support group discussions.

Loss of income. Hispanics who divorce in late-life experience economic losses due to reduced income. Income losses resulted from moving, renting or buying a new place where to live, and paying child support for those with young children. Many lost their homes and this represented another income loss.

Females were the most affected as many were either housekeepers or earned very low incomes. A female participant recalled that she did not have anywhere to go when the husband wanted to sell the house. "He asked me to leave, and I said that I did not have a place where to go...I had no money."

Three of the eight women interviewed had never worked and did not receive alimony due to ignorance of poor legal advice. Two of them remembered being hungry. One recalled, "I was hungry...I would feed my children, but I was hungry most of the time." Another woman went through the same experience and recalled, "I had to support

my son who was in college...The food was not enough so the little I was able to get, I would give it to him.”

Other two women were left with thousands of dollars in debt after their husbands took cash advances from credit cards, took out a second mortgage on the family home, or went on shopping sprees. These women had to assume the debts incurred because their names and credit histories were compromised. One of these women was forced to declare bankruptcy. She still paid the debts incurred by her husband with her limited income. She remembered, “That was horrible.”

Loss of the family unit. Participants remembered that the loss of the intact family was more painful to deal with than their financial struggles. When asked what was worse, a female stated,

To me, the loss of the family nucleus...Before, it was a joy to see everyone around the dinner table...my children and my husband...then...suddenly...I saw myself seating at the table with my children and nobody else...That position is hard...I miss that...not the husband, but the family unit.

Even though females suffered the loss of the family structure, male participants reported suffering the most losses in comparison to females as these last remained connected to their children. That was not the case for three out of the four male participants who lost their contact with their children after divorce. A man explained how his two sons stayed behind in Texas while he moved to Florida where he started a new life. He has not seen his younger son for the past 15 years although he does not know what caused the separation between them.

Another man reported that he has not seen or heard from his only daughter for over 10 years after the divorce. He does not even know where she lives at this time. The third man explained how his three sons left the house with their mother, turned on him,

and did not communicate for years. “I was always very close to my children...The loss of the family was hard to endure...This was what hurt the most...the rest was material.”

Loss of established friendships. Both male and female participants reported the challenge represented by the loss of their partners and long-established friendships. A female explained that her husband had been her friend. She lost both with the divorce. “I lost my friend...my lover.”

Six participants reported feeling the detachment and even the rejection from old friends. A female sadly recalled, “I had 500 friends...My children’s weddings had more than 400 invitees...but when I divorced...those friends I had...with one hand I could count those who remained.”

Others felt inadequate around mutual friends of the couple and decided to stay away. A male participant recounted how a married man avoids inviting a divorced man to the house, just like a married woman avoids inviting a divorced woman over. He said, “Friends...one does not fit because one is not a couple (anymore)...so you start distancing... immediately...(as saying) ‘I do not know you anymore.’” Another male participant agreed,

...because friends, yes...at the beginning...yes, but later you notice...you notice the person who is alone...(Friends) come once, but it is not normal...and I had many friends...I noted the difference with many friends...so before they separated (from me), I did (separate from them).

Loss of security, stability, and support. Seven participants reported that the divorce took away the security and stability they had previously enjoyed during the marriage. A male participant who moved from Nevada to Miami spoke about the lack of stability he had felt. “I had certain insecurities because I knew the divorce was coming and I had to determine my situation...and I didn’t know what to do...I lost the stability of

my job...and my home...and the family.”

Six females recalled the loss of the support their husband had provided. One of them expressed, “I lost the one who sustained me...the home pillar.” A second female stated, “While we were all together, at least the father figure was always there.” Another one reported, “I knew that whatever happened, he was going to be there for us and lead us through...now I am alone.” Still another stated, “I enjoyed the security I had...I knew he would get us through anything...now it is just me.” Another female stated, “I lost my security...the security of having a good man next to me who would support me.” One last female explained,

Even though I did many things alone, I had his support...once you lose that, the doubts invade you...you have to make decisions on your own...should I put this here or there? I was not used to that.

Loss of dreams and expectations. Nine participants expected the marriage to last a lifetime. When it did not, they lost their dreams and expectations. A participant expected his marriage to be better than his parents’ because “Before...there was another lifestyle...there were not as many resources or as much communication (so) I thought that (my marriage) was going to be better...a marriage until the end...for life.”

A female agreed, “I expected a partner for life...really.” A male participant added, “I expected to go through a second honeymoon after the children were gone...to enjoy what we had done and didn’t do.” Another female felt the same way,

I would have liked to have shared time with him as grandparents...that he would truly know who our grandchildren are...they are ours...of both of us...and be able to share something funny they would have done...or talk about how fat or skinny they are...

Another female participant recognized the loss of her dream. “The life I had planned in my retirement within 12 or 15 years with my grandchildren...that big house

that was meant to be filled with grandchildren....(all gone).” Their illusions and dreams were gone with the divorce. “The dreams...they fall...I saw everything destroyed.” Another one sadly commented that, with the divorce, “You lose the illusion.”

Four female participants compared the pain suffered as the pain caused by a death. A participant explained, “It was like a cancer when a person is going to die.” Another one agreed, “We finally divorced...I felt like I did when my mother died.” Another female participant explained, “Separating from (the spouse) was like a death duel...I died...it was like losing a person (to death).” Another female affirmed, “I died and I lost interest in everything...I love to read and I never opened another book...I had orchids and they were my life...they were like my hobby, but...they died...I could not look at them.”

Deteriorated psychological status. Five out of the 12 participants were already married when they entered the U.S. The remaining seven participants met and married their spouses in the U.S. One of the female participants met and married her husband in Washington. The remaining five participants met and married their spouses in Miami-Dade.

During their interviews, none of the participants identified acculturation stress or reduced coping skills as challenges to their marital stability. Nevertheless, they recognized certain stressors adding to the pressure of trying to acculturate to their new life in the U.S. These stressors included: limited job opportunities, loss of social support systems, language barriers, new living arrangements, and concerns about their overall well-being. These stressors should be considered when studying Hispanics as they can add to the challenges faced during the period of divorce.

Research participants recognized that stressors during divorce impacted their psychological status (Table 3). Among others, the breakup of the family unit, the distance from family members (e.g., children), and the loss of life plans were among the stressors that affected their mental and emotional status. The deterioration of their psychological status manifested itself through feelings of sadness, guilt, shame, and loneliness.

Deterioration of their psychological status also showed through signs and symptoms of depression. These included irregular eating and sleeping patterns acknowledged by some of the participants. Some of the participants sought and found professional help among psychiatrists and mental health counselors. The experiences with mental health practitioners were positive and contributed to the reduction of symptoms and overall adjustment to divorce.

Table 3

Deteriorated Psychological Status

Feelings	Interviewee	<i>n</i>
Sadness and depression	I1, I2, I6, I8, I10, I11, I12	7
Guilt	I3, I4, I6, I10	4
Shame	I2, I8, I10	3
Loneliness and emptiness	I1, I3, I4, I6, I7, I8, I12	7
Sought psychological help	I1, I2, I5, I6, I8, I9, I10	7

Note. *n* = number of participants

Sadness. All 12 participants recognized feelings of sadness during the process of divorce. A female reported that she would put her children to sleep and then cry “as a crazy person.” A male participant received treatment for depression during and after the divorce. He remembered, “It was very hard to learn to do things we did together...alone later.”

A female reported losing interest in everything she loved including reading and taking care of her garden. Another female explained, “The only thing I did was cry...I had no consolation...I could not believe that I had to start my life with another man...that could not enter my mind.” She later sought treatment from a mental health counselor.

Guilt. Six out of eight women identified feelings of guilt regarding what they could have done to prevent the divorce. One of them recalled, “I had guilt at the beginning...because of things I should have done for my marriage...what I could have done differently.” Another female reported, “I dedicated my life to my children...I believe that was a big part (of the divorce).”

Another female claimed, “To me, I had failed...may be in not motivating more my marriage...a thousand things...I am guilty...I wish I knew how I failed.” Another one added, “Well, I always feel my guilt...because a marriage is not destroyed by just one person. The two people are to blame.”

Women participants reported feeling guilty for making their families suffer. One of the female participants reported, “I didn’t know how to get out of that situation...I made my children suffer excessively...I was too weak...I still ask their forgiveness 100 times (because) of my cowardice.”

Another female explained, “(Family members) never truly know the insight of what you are going through because...number one...you do not want the others to suffer.” None of the four male participants disclosed feelings of guilt during their interviews. These feelings were not disclosed by the males during observations either.

Shame. Feelings of shame were equally reported by female participants. One female considered her story as shameful and said, “I cannot tell you everything because I

feel ashamed.” Others felt ashamed of their own reactions as they begged their husbands not to leave them. A female explained, “At the beginning, I told him ‘No.’ I begged him...I kneeled in front of him...and begged him not to (leave me)...I thought I could not live without him.” Another female explained how she asked her husband to reconsider his decision to leave even though he had said that he wanted to start a new life. None of the four male participants disclose feelings of shame during their interviews.

Loneliness and emptiness. Seven participants reported that the divorce left them feeling lonely and empty. These feelings were equally shared among males and females in the study. A female affirmed, “The nest was empty...everyone went his or her own way...and I...I was left alone...with my memories.” Another female recalled her feelings of loneliness. “I was on my own...no siblings...no parents...nothing.” Still another female commented, “My life was my family...then...I was left without friends...without anything.” Another female remembered the emptiness and loneliness mixed in together.

The emptiness...the loneliness...and this really big detachment of my marriage...of my partner...mixed in together...your family is there for you...but, there is an emptiness that you feel when you have to go out with your sister and your brother-in-law...and then you kind of sit there by yourself.

A male participant explained that, after being married for almost 47 years, loneliness was the biggest challenge to overcome at his age.

In a given moment...one has nothing to do and you are at home and do not wish to do anything...and it is difficult...I do not like being alone...I would like to have company...but, what else can I do? What is the alternative? Get the first thing I find on the streets and have another disaster?...I can’t do anything...I would like to find a person, but I am not an easy man in the sense that...to me...not every woman calls my attention...I have to know the person first...and I am not at that moment in my life to meet one woman today and another one tomorrow...I am not interested in that...I am not a good dancer...I don’t like nightclubs because I can’t speak to anyone if I have to scream....besides, I can have a drink or two...no problem...but my body can’t tolerate the liquor anymore...It isn’t easy.

Religious struggle. Religion is important for older Hispanic adults and this fact was apparent in the level of engagement and participation in religious activities. The 12 participants were raised in Catholic families and all, except one, married in the Catholic Church. Five of them were involved in their community churches during their marriage.

Participants either worked at the community church, or organized family events, or participated in religious retreats. One of them sang in the church choir. Another one supported the church with monthly donations.

Eight participants reported experiencing religious struggles. The struggle impacted their involvement and participation in religious activities negatively. A female reported that her religious commitment decreased after the divorce. “I became a Sunday Christian...a Catholic that only went to mass on Sundays and nothing else...not what I always was...I was always involved.”

Two participants reported feeling self-conscious during mass services because of their previous involvement with family programs and activities. One of them reported, “Sometimes I felt as if I had a sign on my forehead saying that I was divorced...I thought they would say, ‘Look at that...and their marriage looked so perfect.’” He stopped going to mass for a while.

A female who had helped other marriages recuperate remembered her struggle. Before separating, she approached her husband, “How can we help somebody else if we need help ourselves?” She later realized why she had hoped for a different outcome of their deteriorated relationship. “Because (we) have worked for so many years with Impacto (a religious movement for family enhancement), I thought that every marriage could be saved, including mine.”

Four participants believed that they had failed God, the church, or the Sacrament of Marriage. A female claimed, “To me, the divorce was an offense to God.” Another one reported, “I thought...especially at first...I thought...this cannot be happening...God does not want this...It cannot be.”

Another female insisted, “First of all, I married (my husband)...and I am Catholic... and I lost the sacrament I took...He was very religious too...indeed, we both went to the sacrament very convinced that God was with us at that moment.” A male participant explained his struggle,

I felt bad because I had broken a vote I had made with the church...I had to...I did not have to...but I did...I feel that I failed that sacrament...I feel bad because I had to do it.

The struggle sometimes emerged from their inability to receive communion during mass (i.e., take the body of Christ in the host). A female recalled,

I stopped going to church until I spoke to a lady...and she told me, look, you have to remember that men are the ones who make the laws...if you are okay with God...you do not have to stop going to church’...and I said...‘You know what? She is right’...and I started going to church again...I did not take communion. I didn’t agree, but I started going back.”

Other times, the struggle emerged from deeply rooted religious teachings.

I was never one hundred percent convinced that a person married for the rest of his life and that the one who got divorced and remarried would burn in hell...I never thought that...(besides), I thought that I was never going to go through that so I did not have to think about it.

This participant explained his reaction to old beliefs and practices.

...of course...out of respect...as the church says...you do not take communion when you are divorced...what are you going to do?...we have to be honest with ourselves...It is a failure that part of the religion...to me...it has been invented by men...and makes no sense...(but) when we start as children and adolescents...and one is taught all these things...well...one believes them, but...when an important moment comes...first you do not think...because you learned them that way...(but) then you start thinking.

Despite their struggle, none of the 12 participants reported feeling rejected by their church or any other religious entity (e.g., priest). They denied feeling such rejection when asked during individual interviews. For instance, when asked if he had ever felt rejected, a participant reported, “No...that was like that for a long time, but I do not think it exists (anymore).” Another participant expanded on the comment.

You are always going to find churches and priests who do not accept (divorcees), but many of them do and open their doors...they allow movements for divorcees which did not exist years ago...but now they do...then, there are divorcees who have remarried...although they didn’t marry by the (Catholic) church, they can still participate in the new groups.

Participants were therefore able to recognize their painful losses during the initial periods of divorce which they generally identified as the first three years post-divorce. Participants also acknowledged a deteriorated psychological status during this time characterized by feelings of sadness, guilt, shame, and loneliness. They also recognized struggling with deeply held religious beliefs and practices which impacted their commitment to and participation in religious activities previously enjoyed.

Nonetheless, they were also able to recognize what had helped them adjust after the first three years post-divorce and what they used as coping tools or strategies to help them recover. These were considered contributors to adjustment.

Contributors to Adjustment

Findings show that older Hispanic adults who divorce in late-life are using different resources and coping skills that lead to gradual adjustment (Table 4). Among these contributors are: seeking psychological help, reduced attachment to the ex-spouse, a high level of resilience, and positive perceptions of divorce. As major contributors to adjustment are the availability of social resources and religious coping.

Table 4

Contributors to Adjustment

Contributor	Interviewee	<i>n</i>
Psychological help	I1, I2, I5, I6, I8, I9, I10	7
Reduced attachment	I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12	12
Resilience	I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I7, I8, I11, I12	9
Positive perceptions	I1, I3, I4, I5, I7, I8, I11, I12	8
Social resources (i.e., friends)	I1, I3, I4, I5, I6, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12	10
New romantic relationship	I2, I3, I5, I7, I10	5
Religious coping	I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12	12

Note. *n* = number of participants

Psychological help. Seven participants sought psychological help from mental health professionals to address signs and symptoms of depression. One asked the local priest for help before the divorce. Later, the participant sought help from a psychiatrist and a mental health counselor to stabilize symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Through counseling, they processed their losses and feelings regarding the divorce. One participant recalled, “I went to a psychologist because (the situation) was out of my hands...It was a constant suffering.” Another one reported, “I had to go, as it is expected, to a therapist...I had to go to therapy because it was a very strong thing...too many years...he was my only boyfriend.” With time and psychological help, participants accepted their numerous losses. They were able to mourn those losses. They then devised new life goals and made new plans. One participant explained how a mental health professional can help in the recovery process.

I think a counselor can help a great deal...number one, you can disclose feelings openly...this person can also probably indicate groups that exist that you don't know of...support groups...those for self-esteem.

Reduced attachment. Another contributor to adjustment was the minimal level of attachment they maintained with their former spouses. Participants denied worrying about their marriages or their ex-spouses. They have been able to develop an identity separate from that of husband or wife which they had assumed with marriage. The lack of attachment was acknowledged by all 12 participants equally, even by the one participant who classified his relationship with his ex-spouse as “divine.”

I go to her house...I change the light bulbs. I put up frames. I fix this and that...If she has a problem, she calls me so I can get someone to do whatever she needs...She was recently involved in a big car accident and was in the hospital... and the one who takes her to the doctor is me because she can't drive.

Half of the participants reported keeping a civilized relationship with the former spouse, as a female stated,

We are not close, but we are not enemies...He sends messages through my daughter and participates in birthday parties for the grandkids, but doesn't bring the new wife because she caused the breakup.

Another female keeps her distance from her ex-husband because he still hopes to reconcile and she continues to refuse. Nevertheless, she allows him into the house to visit with his children and grandchildren on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile she goes out for brunch with her cousins to avoid spending time with him.

Two participants denied any attachment whatsoever even though they could still recognize some connection with their ex-partners. One of them explained,

I did not want to stay in that marriage. In other words, I didn't have any attachment. The only attachment I could have had was the big change from being alone, but...being alone was more important than anything else.

A female expressed that, if she still had any kind of attachment or connection with her ex-husband was solely through the Sacrament of Marriage. She strongly denied maintaining any contact or communication with him unless it was necessary.

Three females spoke about the detachment with a note of regret. A female sadly stated, “That man is never going to talk (to me).” Another one expressed,

He can’t see me (but) I have no problem with that...I used to talk to him and he talked to me and everything...but I don’t know...(now) he looks at me with hatred...I think he blames me for everything bad that happens to him.

Another female described her sad relationship with her ex-husband,

I speak to him exclusively when it is imperative...I am cordial, but I do not initiate a conversation...I am sorry, but...it is difficult, when you have three children...and were married for so many years....not to have any kind of link or contact.

Despite some regrets, all participants acknowledged detachment. Detachment from the former spouse was evident in the participants’ ability to form new bonds or attachments to new friends. It was also evident in their ability to form new romantic relationships.

High level of resilience. The ability of Hispanics to overcome adversities is remarkable. Resilience is apparent in the way they recuperate from dealing with the stress of immigration and the separation from family and friends. Resilience is also obvious in their ability to start a new life in a foreign country. Findings show that this resilience comes naturally to Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life.

Some participants recognized resilience as part of their temperament. This is the case of a 69-year-old female participant whose husband asked for the divorce after 26 years of marriage. She then developed cancer. When asked what helped her recover from her painful experience, she proudly commented, “I have a strong temperament...a temperament that does not give up... I’ve gone through everything... illness, separation when I came from Cuba ... the separation in my marriage ...”

Nine other participants commented on how they adjusted to the stress of divorce

by doing whatever was necessary and focusing on positive outcomes rather than on the negative aspects of their situation. As a participant claimed, “I have adapted because I did what I had to do.” A female noted, “I thought, you know what?...you need to work at it...you just let it go...then I thought...I have to regroup here and see how I go forward.”

Another female stated,

I used to say, I have always been a very happy person...very happy...and I saw that I was dying alive...so at that time I said, I have to be happy and I have to find inner peace... I said...this has to stop...I have to go back to being myself...there must be a way in which...even though he is not here anymore...I can go back to being myself.

A male participant resumed what resilience was. “You are going to fall one and two times...the problem is not to fall, but to get up...and to get up until you reach the end...we decide our own destiny...we know what we want.” Another participant explained it further. “Life...one goes through so many things in life...that one has to learn to overcome pain...overcome things...that theme, ‘Adapt, Improvise, and Prevail’ do you want anything better than that?”

Positive perceptions. Hispanics’ initial response to divorce is negative and intense because important life goals and interests have been lost. Gradually, they are able to make sense of their experiences. Instead of focusing on their losses, pain and suffering, they learn to perceive the divorce as an opportunity to: grow psychologically, to feel empowered, and to start anew.

Psychological growth. A participant explained his decision to learn and grow. “I decided to start working on myself, to listen to radio programs to help me...I did not know...I had to learn to do things around the house...(like) cook.” Another one reported,

I feel better now. I did not know how to write a check...I did not know what was paid and what was not...neither in Cuba nor here...the finances...he always took

care of that...but I've had to take charge...I've had to learn...and now I am an expert!

Another participant recognized his growth despite the painful separation from his children.

I have dedicated my time to work (on myself)...I ask myself, 'Where am I going?' I have learned to work on my self-esteem and (this) has helped me a great deal to continue climbing up the ladder...step by step...because this is a process.

Four females learned that they were not to blame for the divorce. "At the beginning...that feeling of guilt...but you learn to accept it later." A female explained, "I have learned a great deal after the marriage...I should have done this, he should have done that....but...well...that I have learned later."

A male explained his learning and growing process,

I have entered the University of Life, which is the most beautiful thing we can do...I feel good with myself...I am my best friend...(The divorce) has helped me grow as a person and this is very important...When you are alone, you have to make your own decisions. It took me a long time, but I've accomplished it...

Self-fulfillment. Participants reported feeling fulfilled and realized because of their accomplishments. One of them stated,

I was another person...a lot more negative. I thought I was much more in love with my husband...and I still am. I will never forget him, but I have learned to value myself...(and) to say, 'I can do it. It can be done'...and I have been able to do it...even though I was in such darkness.

Another one commented on how fulfilled he felt with the acquired knowledge.

We were those people who, at one time, were on the floor...but that helped us to get up...to learn that there are many things that happen...(We must ask) what am I going to learn from that? What happened? Not why did it happen.

New identity. Participants developed a new identify after divorce. A female commented on her free and empowered self after the divorce, "I was free...now I am me...before, I was nobody. A female stated, "(Before) I was always the woman behind

the man.” A male participant added,

The time has come in which everything negative that happens I am going to turn it into positive...I am going to find something positive to go on...It was time to take charge of my life...and the moment comes to say ‘I feel happy and I want to share this happiness with you.

In sum, findings show that older Hispanic adults who divorce in late-life perceive their divorce in a positive light. Despite the stress of overcoming losses, a deteriorated psychological status, and the religious struggle undergone, they are able to mourn and accept the losses incurred. As one participant stated, “(Being divorced) is my reality.” They also expressed relief after ending a bad marriage. “A couple that spends every day shouting and is not happy...I can’t handle that.” When asked what has helped him recover, a participant stated,

It helps to feel good and not to have so many problems as I did have and that...that helped me go on...because I didn’t feel good with that woman anymore and when I separated...I felt a great relief and an interior (peace)...I didn’t have any more problems or arguments.

Another participant agreed, “Today, I’m at peace.” Then another one affirmed, “Now I have peace...my townhouse is very small, but look...I have a place...I am alone...but I am not a burden to my children...I am glad with what I have.”

Older Hispanic adults are able to make sense of their divorce, conduct a positive appraisal of the situation, and move on with their lives. A female who went hungry for days during her divorce, now just focuses on the positive “I was hungry, but not anymore...I sought help and I found help...I am starting anew.” Another female’s statement show how she is moving on despite her initial guilt and suffering, “I am O.K...I am constantly busy...I do not stop...not only work, but going out with family and friends.”

Availability of social resources. Findings show that the availability of social resources helped in the recovery process. Participants sought support from a network of family and friends. Some developed new friendships. Although five participants mentioned the need for economic stability (i.e., job and income) as a contributor to recovery, 10 of the 12 participants agreed that the support received from others was more important than money.

Money helps and does not help...There are people who are different,...but, in my case (is different) because I was married for so many years...now I can take a plane and go anywhere, but what do I do when I get there?...This means that (people) are more important than money.

Participants agreed that they needed people to relate to and interact with. Thus they sought “the help one needs from people.” They found this help in family members such as children, siblings and elderly parents. Others found it by entering into a new romantic relationship.

A new relationship. Half of the participants entered a new romantic relationship after the divorce. They agreed that the new partner helped in the process of recovery by reducing their feelings of sadness, loneliness, and emptiness. A female participant reported enjoying the new relationship tremendously after she found “a wonderful man” to share her life with. He took away the sadness and loneliness, but he was older than she was and died a few years later. Two other participants live with their new partners. A female recalled the benefits of having another man in her life.

He is my partner...He has helped me pass the tunnel...He has helped me a great deal...I am grateful to him for that...if I feel bad, he is the one who cooks...he is the one who cares for me...I am there.

A male participant spoke highly about his new love, “I wish I had had this relationship many years ago because I feel great...and have peace...and I am very

happy.”

Despite recognizing the benefits of having a new relationship, eight participants (seven females and one male) reported that they preferred being alone. A female explained her thoughts about a new relationship.

I think that has pros and cons...It helps if you are ready. If you are not ready, it doesn't help because (then) you realize...as it happened to me...I started a new relationship, but I was not ready....but I was not used to hear pretty words and I was vulnerable...it was like...an infatuation....with the passage of time, I realized that...in reality...I loved that person, but I was not in love.

Another female stated, “I do not want to have a boyfriend just for company.”

Another female agreed, “Truly, I do not need anybody...I would not want anyone else, no other relationship...I feel like I can be on my own.” Still another female stated,

I had a relationship for some time, but it was not good for me...and had another relationship for a longer time, but at the end...it was not good for me either and...that was it...I prefer to be alone.

Others prefer to enjoy their newly-found freedom, as a female participant said,

We are financially independent...set in our lifestyles...I married at 19...left from my parents' supervision to my husband's.... after the divorce...oh, wait a minute! I am my own person! I travel if I want. I sleep if I want. I cook if I want...and that, compounded with everything else...is very hard for the right person to come into my life....Not that I am putting a wall against it...I think...I know, that, when that person comes, everything will flow. I do not have to wake up with doubts...if there are doubts, we have to reconsider.

Whether they start a new relationship or not, participants acknowledged the benefits of social resources in providing emotional support. Friends, family, and new partners help them improve their sense of well-being by allowing them to share feelings and experiences; thus, helping them adjust and move on with their lives.

Religious coping. Findings show that older Hispanic adults turn to their religious entities and community churches to relieve emotional pain. They overcome distress by

becoming involved in religious practices and activities. They pray to God and join a religious support group, such as Agape (Table 5).

Table 5

Religion and Spirituality

Experience	Interviewee	<i>n</i>
Religious Coping		
Involvement before divorce	I1, I2, I3, I5, I6, I7, I8, I10, I12	9
God brings peace and healing	I1, I2, I4, I7, I8, I10	6
Divorce perceived as God's will	I1, I5, I7, I10, I12	5
Agape Support Group		
Psychological growth	I1, I2, I3, I5, I6, I7, I8, I10, I12	9
Healing and comfort	I1, I2, I5, I8, I10, I12	6
Support from new friends	I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I8, I10, I11, I12	9

Note. *n* = number of participants

Participants' statements reflect that believing in God brought comfort, support, and strength while helping them overcome feelings of sadness, guilt, and loneliness. Their strong religious beliefs and long-lasting relationship with God help them cope and overcome crises and chaos. One participant explained, "Well, thanks to God, I have always known the Lord and I have never gone against Him."

Eventually, participants became involved in church activities sponsored by the Archdiocese of Miami to help divorcees recuperate from divorce. Participants visited local churches, participated in spiritual retreats, or joined Bible classes to help them recover. All of them joined the support group called Agape.

When asked what helped her overcome the stress of divorce, a participant expressed, "Thank God, the religious faith I have... that I have very, very, very, very

deep inside me, very strong, very ... the help of my friends ... the help of Agape ...”

Another participant explained, “I found support on the spiritual. (It) helped me a great deal. I went to church. I started to listen to (religious) radio programs too.” Another participant reported,

At the beginning, I developed a need to read this book...to read the Bible...it was my constant supporting companion...to grab onto that...I still do when...you know...one has her moments...her lows.

A male participant explained the importance of spirituality in times of need,

The religious part exists...it will always exist...people have the tendency that when something good happens, they don't worry about anything...but when something bad happens...then they ran to church...to God...that is human nature everywhere.

In agreement, a male participant who had separated from church at the beginning of his process explained why he returned to church. “Later, I asked myself, ‘where I am going?’ I can’t go any other place.”

Participants found support and comfort in God. One expressed, “Honestly, God has provided me with more than enough.” Another one stated, “God gave me the courage (to go on).” Still another reported having received much needed help “at the moment I needed it...like everything from God...it was not a coincidence.” Another participant affirmed, “That was God...the only one who has helped me has been God.”

They believed in God’s justice and forgiveness.

God, in His omnipotence, knows perfectly well how things are...and I understand that I did not sin...when I stopped having a relationship with (my husband)...and I stopped working and fighting for a (relationship) that did not exist...God knows this also.

They found acceptance and considered the failure of their marriages as God’s will. “This is what God wanted my marriage to be.” A man explained, “The time comes

when the best thing is to separate...as a book says, 'they separated and were happy' and I think that is the best...for the children to grow up in a sane environment." Another participant expressed, "I learned that God does not want an unhappy person....God wants me happy...and if I was not...that could not continue." Still another participant commented, "Also, I realized that...the same way (God) was with us when we married, God was still with us...but with each one in a separate life...I was able to accept that."

Although some experienced religious struggle and negative outcomes (e.g., guilt), results show that religious coping was related to positive outcomes such as personal growth and emotional well-being. These outcomes helped participants make a positive appraisal of the divorce experience. When asked what she thought contributed to her adjustment, another female participant responded, "A combination of friendship, of a support group, of the family...but, to me, without God, I could not have been able to go on...if you lost (your faith), try to recuperate it." Another participant agreed,

As long as God is there for me...He takes me by the hand and I hold onto Him...and there I am...He is who truly, truly speaks for me...and gets ahead for me...I look back and say, 'Well, Lord...you were always there for me because otherwise...where would I be?

Agape. The 12 participants were (or had been) active members of the Agape support group of the Catholic religion. Participation in the Agape groups helped them develop the coping skills they needed to adjust to their divorce. Through Agape, they were able to process the end of their marriages while receiving support in a religious environment. A male participant who had been engaged in Agape for over 13 years explained how the group functioned.

These groups are sponsored by the Archdiocese (of Miami) and headed by the Director of Family Life. The groups and retreats welcome people of all denominations, not only Catholics, because these meetings are intended to

improve people as human beings...our condition as human beings...the religious beliefs are something else.

The participant also explained that the topics discussed in the groups are presented in a practical and special way to take group members step by step in the process of recuperating from the loss and pain suffered. Participants agreed on the numerous benefits they received by being members of Agape. These included: psychological growth, comfort, healing, and support.

Psychological growth. A participant explained how the groups help members gain insight on how to recuperate from the divorce and how to sustain a new relationship.

They give you a pill to take away the pain and you progress little by little....The last steps try to explain what to do when you have a new relationship...so you realize in what condition you are starting this new relationship...and what position you are going to assume (i.e., child, parent, or adult)...It is designed to teach you how to keep a relationship...and that the ideal relationship is between adults.

Two females explained what they had learned through group presentations and discussions under the topic Transactional Analysis which involves assuming different roles during the marriage (i.e., child, adult, or parent). The two female participants realized that they had inhibited their spouses' growth by assuming the role of mothers during their marriages. Acting as mothers (instead of wives), these females protected their husbands and tried to make them feel better. They hid their true feelings and even assumed their huge debts with minimum salaries. The knowledge as helped them grow.

Research participants also learned that that they should continue to participate in the support groups even after they enter a new relationship. A participant explained why "...now is that you need to stay...to see the signs and to avoid going through the same thing (you went through) before." A female participant agreed.

These support groups are great. They have taught me what I can change. I have learned that we need time to enter (into a new relationship)...we need time to get to know ourselves...to learn to give...and for the other person to give as well.

Comfort and healing. Participants found relief and comfort in the support groups as members helped one another. One of them explained,

Well...first of all...I found a feeling of help...some (people) did not know how to help you...now I realize this...because they didn't have the training they were supposed to receive to provide that help...but what they wanted was to get you out of the problem you had at that moment.

Another one agreed,

These groups, especially Agape, are a process for personal growth...they help us to continue recuperating and healing...removing the toxins...until we start questioning...seeking...being open-minded.

Three participants believed that their experiences and stories were different from everyone else's. A female claimed, "I considered that my divorce wasn't easy." Another one considered that hers "was the worst divorce ever." A male participant identified his story as "out of the usual." Another one reported, "Look...everyone has a story to tell about his or her marriage and divorce...but theirs have nothing to do with mine...mine is abnormal." Others found comfort in comparing their situation to others' in the group. "At Agape, I discovered that there are hundreds of women like me." Another female stated,

Despite the fact that my divorce was bad...there were other people (in the group) who had gone through even worse than I had...that helped me understand that...one always thinks that one's situation is very bad...but there are others who had been through worse.

Research participants found comfort in helping others who were going through similar experiences. A male participant reported, "The time came when I decided that I wanted to be part of those who helped." Another participant felt the same way. "I felt obligated (to get involved)...I was helped...I received a big help because...I felt alone in

the world after so many years.” Another very involved member recalled, “I became very involved...in the groups and the retreats because that helped me a great deal to go through my (divorce) process.” A female was full of emotion when speaking about the benefits she derived from helping others.

...to be able to help others...that helps...people who went to the group that were as (bad as) I was when I started...and I felt better...and, if I was able to overcome (the pain), I think that helping others helped me too because...as I gave, I received too...the support I received and the support I gave...that helped me tremendously.

Support. Participants spoke about the new friends they made when they joined the group. “Thanks to Agape, I made new friends...very good friends all of them.” These friendships have been maintained over decades.

I always thought that friendships were those you developed during your childhood...and that later...as an adult...you only had acquaintances, but not friendships...and I found a group of people that think like I do...and I have found beautiful people...truly, it was a revelation!

A participant comment on the kind of support he sought when he joined Agape.

Well, in reality, I cannot say that I did it for the religion...I (joined) because of the company...the group...and to socialize and forget everything I was going through...I did it to meet people...and to get distracted...and to take away what I had inside.

Through the years, they have received and provided support to one another in difficult times. The support has helped them overcome their pain and become better persons. One recognized, “Without that group...I wouldn’t have been anybody...anybody.” Another one participant recalled,

When I felt very depressed, I would call someone (from the group), and I would start talking... I would not say that I was depressed, but would only talk...That helped me as a person to grow.

A female spoke about the warm welcome she received when she started in the group.

That first day I could not talk...weeks went by and still I could not talk...I would introduce myself, but I could not talk...the group was very big...and (the coordinator)...that first day...(she) gave me a hug...and I felt so much human warmth...so much understanding...the group was my medicine...I wanted the groups to last for three days.

When asked if the group had helped her, a female answered, “Tremendously...it still does....even though we have our differences...this is a second family that you know you can always count on...this is a beautiful thing.” She later explained that she had been involved in Agape for more than eight years as a member and that she later became a group facilitator in a local parish.

Participants reported feeling supported and understood, but never judged.

I started to find new friends in these groups and this people understood me and I understood them...they comprehended my problems and I comprehended theirs...and then we got together and thanks to that, I helped myself.

Another participant added,

There, nobody judges you, everyone has gone through the same...you can speak about your feelings openly and then feel the support that you cannot find anywhere else...you feel love from the family and everything else...and feel the support, but not the support that you really need as a divorcee.

Still another one agreed,

When you have Agape and you know that the people are going through the same thing...and you go to have a cup of coffee (with them)...you feel comfortable...you feel okay...it is not that bad.

Through their participation in the support group, older Hispanic adults were able to process their marriages, their divorces, and the possibilities of a future relationship. They were able to recognize losses and share feelings of sadness, guilt, and loneliness. They were also able to develop long-lasting and supportive friendships. They felt understood but not judged. In other words, participation in the Agape experience helped older Hispanic adults adjust to their divorce experience because they learned to know,

love, and respect themselves. When asked what helped her adjust, a 62-year-old female stated,

You need to know yourself...to love yourself...to respect yourself because if you don't, nobody is going to do it either...if you don't love yourself or don't respect yourself...you don't expect it from others...you have to give it to yourself before you can receive it.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Results of this study indicate that older Hispanic adults perceive their divorce as a challenge. They recognize the loss of important goals and interests. Their mental and emotional statuses are negatively impacted. They also struggle with long-held religious beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, Hispanics focus on the positive outcomes of the experience. This includes: psychological growth, newly found freedom, and newly established relationships. They also perceive the divorce as an opportunity to devise new goals, develop new identities, and eventually reach self-fulfillment.

Results indicate that Hispanics identify their divorce as the best alternative to a dysfunctional relationship and the only way to reach peace and happiness. Those who join a religious support group (e.g., Agape) report an insightful and rewarding experience. They find comfort, understanding, and long lasting friendships. Through group membership, Hispanics feel involved, supported, and understood. They feel less lonely and more secure. They also feel engaged in the religious community. This provides balance and healing by bringing about religious meaning and purpose to their divorce. These conclusions corroborate findings made by experts (McCage, 2003; Jenkins, 2010; Yarnoz et al., 2008) regarding the positive effects and the therapeutic value of participating in a religious support group because of the potential for unity through group identity and ritual.

Similarities and Differences across Genders

Findings show that older Hispanic adults in Miami-Dade County are able to overcome the numerous challenges they face in the first three years of divorce. During this time, both male and female Hispanics deal with numerous and painful losses. These

findings confirm suggestions made by Wu and Schimmele (2007) regarding the significant economic and social distress associated with divorce in late-life.

In her study of seven mid-life divorced women in Texas, Leighman (2009) focused on the distress caused by “the loss of a dream.” Results of the present study reveal that Hispanic adults suffer the painful loss of their dreams and expectations. Dreams of growing old together and enjoying the grandchildren as an intact family are broken and lost. The loss of the dream becomes a challenge to adjustment for Hispanics men and women alike.

Findings of the present study also reveal that Hispanic men and women suffer high levels of stress from the losses incurred during the divorce. However, Hispanic women suffer greater economic losses during divorce when compared to men, as Dew (2009) had suggested. This greater financial loss results from their dedication to the family as women allow their husbands to find better economic opportunities while they raise the children or take care of elderly parents. As Coleman et al. (2006) affirmed, *la familia* makes Hispanic women place the needs of the family above their own wishes and needs.

Indeed, familism is an essential characteristic of the Hispanic culture and considered “the single most important institution” among Hispanics (Christenson et al., 2006, p. 476). Cabassa et al. (2007) agreed that being married and having a family is important for older Hispanic adults. The emphasis made on the supportive role of the family is therefore a cause for stress during divorce, especially for women who place family needs above their own and pay the consequences at the time of divorce.

Both male and female Hispanic immigrants suffer the deterioration of their mental

status during divorce. They report feeling sad and depressed when faced with family problems and lack of emotional support, as proposed by Goodkind et al. (2008). To process their losses and overcome this stressful period, Hispanics of both genders seek professional help. Their experiences with mental health professionals are positive. They report reduced symptoms, psychological growth, and improved emotional well-being afterwards.

Nonetheless, Hispanic women and men differ in the negative emotions they report. Women acknowledge feelings of guilt and shame regarding what they could have done to save their marriages. They feel guilty and ashamed about the possibility of having failed the husband or the marriage in some way. They also feel guilty and ashamed for making their children suffer by crying, becoming sad, or being ‘weak.’

A possible explanation for these feelings of guilt and shame among women is in the emphasis Hispanics place on *la familia* or the family. Familism means maintaining loyalty, solidarity, and cohesion within the family. As Hispanics place such high value on the marriage and the family, their inability to keep the family together can understandably result in guilt and shame.

Hispanic men do not report such feelings, but they emphasize loneliness more so than women. While women recognize feeling free from marriage responsibilities and think twice about entering a new relationship, Hispanic men feel uncomfortable being home alone “at a determined moment.” They try to stay busy in group activities and weekly outings. Most of them look for a new relationship to take away the loneliness.

This reaction from Hispanic men can be also explained by the strong emphasis placed on the family unit. Most Hispanic men lose contact with their children after

divorce. When this happens, they lose the interaction and the reciprocity they derived from their nuclear family. They stop providing and receiving the emotional support that was a source of meaning and pride before. The result is older Hispanic men who report feeling sad and lonely throughout the divorce.

Another possible explanation for Hispanic men's emotional distress after divorce is their machist mentality. Machism, as mentioned under cultural challenge for Hispanics, might easily contribute to the deterioration of their psychological status. The machist mindset involves the belief that men are the economic providers and protectors of the family. As such, Hispanic men take pride in providing food, shelter, and comfort to the family until divorce deprives them of that opportunity. Although none of the male participants in this study acknowledged machist attitudes or behaviors, it seems fitting to believe that a machist mentality is a contributor to their emotional distress during the process of divorce.

Reaching Adjustment

Despite differences, findings show that both Hispanic males and females are eventually able to reach adjustment post-divorce. They seek psychological help with positive results. They develop new relationships that provide support. They also join religious groups to process pain, receive support and grow psychologically. In addition, they are able to make a positive appraisal of their circumstances, realize that divorce was the only option out of their troubled marriages, and move on with their lives.

As they reflect back, they report feeling 'relatively free' of any symptoms of mental health (e.g., depression). They also report ability to function properly in the completion of their daily roles and responsibilities. They report adjustment.

Older Hispanic adults who divorce in late-life are able to reorganize life goals and re-stabilize internal working models in order to adjust (Mandelbaum, 2011). They are able to reach acceptance, self-love, and self-exploration. They are also able to develop an identity separate from that which they had when married (i.e., husband or wife).

Findings corroborate suggestions made by Jenkins (2010) that successful post-divorce adjustment results from having access to adequate social networks. These networks allow divorcees to develop new social identities and integration to the community. Kramrei et al. (2007) and Strine et al. (2008) also commented on Hispanics' ability to develop strong patterns of social networks and support as a way of adjusting to the adversities of divorce.

Findings show that divorce for older Hispanic adults in Miami-Dade is related to personal choice, self-fulfillment, and self-betterment (Darling et al., 2012). It is also related to developing and maintaining healthy relationships. Findings also confirm suggestions made by other experts that the search for a happier, peaceful life outweighs any stress experienced as those who reported extreme distress or struggled with frequent conflicts during the marriage showed improved functioning, higher levels of autonomy, and psychological growth (Amato, 2010; Miller, 2009; Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Hispanics who experience divorce in late-life show appropriate divorce adjustment deriving from a reduced attachment to their former spouse. As Mandelbaum (2011) suggested, attachment was lower because years have passed after divorce and there was little conflict in the relationship they maintained with their ex-spouses. Hispanics in this research denied spending time with the ex-spouse, even those who regretted the end of the relationship. Many divorced Hispanics also enter a new romantic

relationship. Although the new partner does not substitute the attachment figure of the ex-spouse, it nevertheless represents the beginning of a new emotional link which is possible after reaching adjustment, as proposed by Muñoz-Eguileta (2007).

The limited attachment to their ex-spouses, combined with their high level of resilience and positive perceptions of the experience conduces to adjustment post-divorce among Hispanic immigrants thus corroborating assertions made by experts (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008; Webb, 2008). Instead of focusing on hardships and adversities, Hispanics are able to adapt to their new life as single individuals by devising and committing themselves to the pursuit of new goals, seeking a better future, and developing social relationships for support. They also engage in positive religious coping.

Results of the study show that religion (or spirituality) is a powerful contributor to adjustment for divorced Hispanics. Hispanics adults take religious practices and beliefs seriously and deeply during periods of stress and suffering. Results of this study show that most of the research participants perceived their faith in God as an important coping strategy and that some sought advice from their community priests.

Hispanics turn to their community churches in times of hardship, as proposed by Arango-Lasparilla et al. (2009) and Krumrei et al. (2009). Religious practices and affiliations serve as coping tools when in need of healing emotional and mental pain, when trying to make sense of stressful experiences, and when trying to find healing and comfort. Religion and spirituality also benefit divorcees by helping them find the strength to endure as well as meaning in their challenging circumstances (Ellison et al., 2012). They also influence the way in which divorcees appraise and respond to the stress of divorce.

In addition, results of this research study confirm findings by Qualls (2008) and Jenkins (2010) that participation in support groups emphasizes self-work and betterment and helps divorcees recover. Religious support groups help them *embrace*. They help divorcees feel better, less lonely, and more secure. Participation in the support groups therefore brings balance, healing, emotional insight, and gradual adjustment.

Opposite to what some experts claim, divorced Hispanics do not perceive limited support or rejection from their church (Qualls, 2008). On the contrary, they confirm Jenkins' (2010) assertions that church leaders are changing their views regarding divorce and acknowledging the importance of providing support by the development and implementation of religious support groups to foster adjustment.

Implications of Findings

Results of the present study are beneficial in numerous ways. They benefit the Hispanic population who has divorced in late-life by increasing their perceptions of the experience and providing constructive suggestions on how they can reach adjustment. Hispanics in this age group recognize divorce as a temporary and transitory stage in life that involves change, stress, and chaos. They accept and overcome the losses incurred, mourn the attachments made with the ex-spouse, and develop new relationships. They make sense of divorce, ascribe new meaning to the divorce, and devise new life goals.

The study also provides new insights to help mental health professionals understand, assess, and treat this population group. With knowledge gained from this study, mental health practitioners can contribute to the development of effective interventions and programs to fulfill this population's psychological needs. They must consider the importance of religion and religious involvement for this segment of the

population. Furthermore, this study has also contributed to the literature by adding to the limited qualitative research available to students and researchers on the topic of divorce adjustment among Hispanics.

Suggestions for Future Research

The stories of the interviewees' former spouses would be most informative and interesting. The research questions when interviewing the former spouses would include the same questions used during this study. This will allow a better understanding of the challenges and contributors to adjustment for the former spouse.

Another study could be done from the perspective of other Hispanic groups (e.g., second generation, non-immigrants). This will allow a better understanding of the contributors to adjustment. It would show, for instance, whether resilience is a contributor to adjustment common to all Hispanics or just common among immigrants.

The Hispanic adults in this study reported feeling adjusted and able to devise new life goals despite going through a debilitating life experience. There must be other Hispanics who have not reached adjustment even after decades since their divorce. A study of the lives and perceptions of these non-adjusted Hispanics would help determine why some Hispanics make a successful recovery while others do not.

Another insightful study would be an in-depth investigation of the expectations held by Hispanic males and females concerning divorce and how these expectations are either fulfilled or not during the marriage. Researching the difference between feelings of guilt and shame between genders is another suggestion. It would be interesting to know if men feel the guilt and the shame as much as women do or if, perhaps, men's guilt and shame result from being distant from the children and their inability to provide for them.

There are vast possibilities for future research studies in the topic of divorce adjustment among Hispanics. There are also vast possibilities that the stories that will emerge from these studies will be worth the effort. This research study is evident proof. The story of older Hispanic adults who divorce in late-life in Miami-Dade is an insightful one. It is a story worthy of any researcher's time, effort, and dedication. It is a story of faith, resilience, flexibility, and adaptability when facing adversities. In the words of one participant, "...that theme, 'Adapt, Improvise, and Prevail' do you want anything better than that?"

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Appendix A

Protocol

PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your self-concept and self-esteem as a child.
2. Describe your parents' marriage.
3. What were your expectations for your marriage?
4. Tell me about your marriage in the early years.
5. Talk about your marriage as it deteriorated.
6. Tell me about your feelings at the time of your divorce.
7. How did you cope with the loss of your marriage?
8. What were your greatest losses from the divorce?
9. Discuss the long-term effects of the divorce.
10. Draw three periods in the divorce process: before, during, and after the divorce.

Appendix B

Observational Guide/Checklist

Description of the physical setting:

Topic of group discussion:

Particular events or activities (what occurred in the group?):

Personal reactions:

Agreements on:

Number of members who agreed:

Disagreements on:

Number of members who disagree

Not voicing an opinion (but nodding of their heads):

Interaction of the research subjects with other group members,

Reflective notes:

Personal thoughts:

Insights:

Themes:

Appendix C

Completed Observation Checklist

although not professionally trained,
still supportive, ^{friendship}

OBSERVATIONAL CHECKLIST

Date: 2/19/13

Time: 8:30 pm - 10:45 pm

Description of the physical setting:

low ceiling, fluorescent white light
white walls, yellow doors, closet door / blue sink

Topic of group discussion:

Transactional Analysis

Particular events or activities (what occurred in the group?):

participants try to id. which
role they assumed
in the marriage

Personal reactions:

Agreements on:

Number of members who agreed:

Disagreements on:

Number of members who disagree

Not voicing an opinion (but nodding of their heads):

female
female part, quiet

Interaction of the research subjects with other group members,

Reflective notes:

Personal thoughts:

Insights:

Themes:

Guilt, shame?

① Prayer to
Holy Spirit
Bring Peace
(Read from Piece
Paper

Roles adopted during
Adult + recommend
Child
Parent

2 ladies realized
that they were 'mothers'
to their partners.
one sick Bipolar
on sick sexual dys
protected them
hiding feelings

not a matter
of agreement or
disagreement
position to
avoid it
in the future

- supportive
environment
therapeutic too

p. eye contact when speaking as if
trying to remember

guilt apparent from females
what could I have done?

both sink door adjacent
Door

Jesus
I trust
in You
by the door.

Portrait of
John Paul II
1978-2005

Appendix D

Sample Field Notes

My heart took delight in all my work, and this was
the reward for all my labor.
Ecclesiastes 3:22

(Insights)
Field notes

2/25/13

Shared the pain
when speaking of losses,
infant/childhood, family issues.

Shared the laughter of
those reminiscences
about the younger years
of the 'treehouses', of camp
when young & other things

* So far - by 8th interview
of the family

social support that
financial resources

↓ attachment

new relationship

Feel the nostalgia of
losses -
loneliness - (not good)
nobody has spoken about

- the broken dream? -
but it is obvious that
there were dreams
and expectations

not really - 1 not entirely adjusted
+ guilt
50% men & women - 50%
→ + 10% women

(one most) have suffered from
depression & sorrowful
just like one woman -
(Surprising) - denial of Indian
machines

↳ women usually receive & support
from children than men.

Appendix E

Matrix of Emerging Themes

